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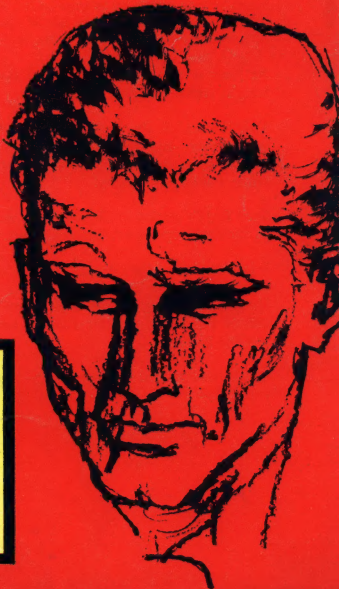
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**"THE
DA VINCI
AFFAIR"**



SHELL SCOTT

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Leo Margulies
Publisher

SHELL SCOTT

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1966

Vol. 1, No. 1

NEW SHELL SCOTT SHORT NOVEL

THE DA VINCI AFFAIR

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

A purple lady and a green martini can make a deadly brew, particularly when the lady has a man on her mind, and he is just interested in—murder!

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Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN

Editorial Director

H. N. ALDEN

Associate Editor

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Although Shell Scott, craggy-jawed, hard living private detective, makes his magazine title bow in this issue, he is by no means a stranger to mystery-adventure readers the world over. In fact, more than 40,000,000 copies of his novels have been sold—with tens of thousands pouring off the presses every day! Yes, Richard S. Prather's white-thatched man-hunter with an eye for the ladies and a nose for danger dominates today's real-life crime reading market as thoroughly as he conquers fictional Evil in these pages. It is with the greatest pleasure and anticipation that we present, for the first time anywhere, Shell Scott's own magazine. May your reading adventures with him in these pages be as rewarding as they are exciting!

THE DA VINCI AFFAIR

A purple lady and a green Martini or two can lure a man into deadly danger—in more ways than one!

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

I CAUGHT UP with Lupo in The Happy Time, and it was a very unhappy time for Lupo.

He was in a rear booth of the small bar on Third Street in downtown Los Angeles, having a high-ball with an older man and appearing highly animated, but his animation died a horrible death when he glanced up and spotted me as I stormed through the door.

It was past ten o'clock at night,

but The Happy Time was not one of the favorite spots of most L.A. nightgoers. Only a half-dozen or so other customers were in the joint.

That suited me fine, but it didn't suit Lupo at all. His eyes got very wide and his mouth puckered as if he were saying "Oop!" or had swallowed a pickle. He blurted something to the man with him, and the guy lit out, headed for the back door.

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Featuring

SHELL SCOTT



For a half second I thought it might be Alston Spaniel, one of the guys I was eager to kill. But this guy was too large and flabby. In fact, he looked like the man I'd seen with Lupo earlier, but that was enormously unimportant to me at the moment. It was important that the guy was *not* Spaniel, one of the two guys I wanted to shoot, and that the other guy I wanted to shoot, right in the eye, was Lupo.

Lupo tried to slide from the booth, too, but he didn't make it.

By then I was close enough to whack my open left hand against his chest and slam him back against the wall. His head clunked back against the wood and he said, "Oop!"

I said, "It's good to see you again, Lupo. But I'll bet you're surprised to see me. So full of life and fun, I mean."

It took him awhile, and he wet his lips a couple of times, but finally he said, just as if this was the most natural thing in the world, "Surprised?"

"Yeah. Surprised. Astonished. You didn't know anything about that art heist, huh? Not much you didn't."

"I didn't steal the damn thing, Scott. I swear. I didn't heist that da—"

I cut him off. "I never said you did, Lupo. But you sure as hell know who grabbed it. And you knew the *last* time I talked to you, didn't you, pal?"

He licked his lips again. "I don't—get it."

"Let me give you a clue. I just got through killing a guy—"

"Kill—"

"Yeah. Shot him twice in the guts. Very messy. Blood slopped out of his mouth and everything."

Lupo wasn't all bristly masculine to begin with, and his pallor paled considerably. Soft breath sighed from his mouth, and the lids drooped over his long-lashed dark eyes. He liked gay conversation, brittle witticisms, dialogue about Byron and Shelley and Keats and such. He didn't like talk about blood and guts, or anything in that general area.

I said, "I thought he was going to puke everything but his bladder all over my pretty gold carpet. But it could have been me, right? It could have been me throwing my guts up."

He looked awful.

I went on, "I know why he tried to kill me, of course. We both know, don't we?"

"I don't know what you mean, Scott. I don't know—"

"Sure you do. And you also know what I'm going to do to you, don't you?"

I reached under my coat, pulled out the .38 Colt Special and cocked it. "Lupo, you're going to think I'm a mean sonofabitch, but it can't be helped." I pointed the gun at his right eye and pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell with a sharp click—since I had taken pains to be sure an empty cylinder would be under the hammer when it fell—but even though Lupo must, for an instant, have realized he wasn't dead yet, the effect on him was unusually striking. He fainted.

I swore softly, stuck the gun back in its clamshell holster and glanced around. One couple at a nearby table was looking my way, but apparently nobody had noticed the gun. At least no customers were racing for exits.

Lupo had sprawled peacefully across the table, overturning his highball glass. The liquid spread over the dark table top, dripped to the floor. I waited.

If I was wrong about Lupo, I would apologize for being too hard on him, and even for saying blood and guts; but it wasn't likely I was wrong about Lupo. In which case he was getting off easy. I hadn't really shot him. Not yet.

He lay so still it worried me. Maybe he was dead. But I felt his pulse and it was still pulsing. I was glad. Actually I rather liked Lupo—at least I had until tonight. I didn't care for his associates, or his brand of perfume and such, but he was neat and tidy, joyous and witty—usually, that is.

Right now his left eyebrow was lying in a puddle of what smelled like brandy and soda, and it was eight to five he wouldn't feel joy and wit stirring in him for quite a

while. A little noise rose from his throat.

I waited for more noises, and ran over the sequence of events in my mind. Yeah, it almost had to be Lupo.

This night, a balmy Wednesday in September, had started out on a very different plane. I'd been at home—that's Hollywood's Spartan Apartment Hotel, on North Rossmore, across from the green acres of the Wilshire Country Club—having completed a satisfactory day in and out of my one-man agency, *Sheldon Scott, Investigations*.

I was fresh from the shower, wrapped in a towel, and about to get dressed, ready for whatever this warm new evening might bring. No plans, just hope. I'm a very hopeful fellow.

The phone rang. Hopefully, I grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Shell?"

"Who else?"

"This is Antonia."

Hot dog.

"Atonia, darling!"

"Are you doing anything?"

"Just putting my pants off—on—up—getting dressed. What are you doing?"

"I'm—oh, Shell. Are you sober?"

"Of course I'm sober. Haven't had a drink all—why? Do I have to be sober?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

"Neither had I. Now you mention it, I need a drink."

"Me too."

"Good. Why don't I put my pants wherever the hell I was putting them, and come over, and we'll go out into this warm September madness and—"

"Fine."

"I haven't yet told you what I have in mind, dear."

"What shall I wear?"

"Well, pants, of course. Antonia, forget I said that, will you?"

"Forget my pants?"

"I don't know why I am suddenly so obsessed with pa—skip it. Wear one of your—I've got it. Remember that slinky black contraption you wore two weeks ago? The one that goes clear up to your neck in front and is cut way down in back?"

"Yes."

"Wear that one backwards."

"Shell! I won't, either. I'll surprise you."

"That would surprise me. And seven thousand other—"

"What time will you be over, darling?"

"About two minutes before you finish dressing, if you'll take it easy."

"Sevenish? I'd better hurry then."

"Yeah, you'd better."

We hung up.

I did a little hop and skip into the bedroom. I felt good. Life was good. Antonia was good. Actually,

just between you and me, she was sensational.

Holding my pants in one hand and shorts in the other, I stood in the bedroom, thinking: *Antonia, darling!*

I could see her in my mind's eye: a long, luscious tomato with thick amber-colored hair, dangerous heavy-lidded eyes, lips trembling in passion, curling, puckering—my mind's eye was getting bloodshot—breasts like twin Vesuviuses, white skin smooth as ice but warm enough to melt the wax in your ears, a 37-ah, 22-oh, 36-wow steamy pizza fresh from the Mediterranean oven, still cooking.

Better get cooking myself, I thought. Four minutes later I had my six feet, two inches and two hundred and six pounds draped in a lightweight blue-gray suit, unstarched white-silk shirt—Italian silk, just for Antonia—splendidly bright Windsor-knotted tie, and gleaming Cordovans on my big feet.

I looked in the full-length mirror.

"Hot dog," I said. Not because I was impressed with myself; I was still thinking about Antonia. Then, however, I took a good look in the mirror. My short-cropped white hair was still combed straight up into the air, just as the barber had left it three days ago. I wagged the sharply angled white brows, twitched my slightly bent nose, stuck out my tongue.

Well, that's life, I thought: that's what thirty years of smog will do to a man. Nothing I could do about any of it. But my tongue looked great. Probably my best feature, I thought philosophically. Which put me in the same class as the guy with perfect feet.

I glanced at my short-barreled revolver and harness on the dresser, wondering if I should wear it. There are, believe it or not, numerous guys in Southern California who would like to kill me, for one reason or another. I almost never go out among my enemies, men, without the heater handy. But I figured I wouldn't need it tonight. Not with Antonia.

The phone rang again. This time it wasn't Antonia. It was a guy named G. Raney Madison.

I had heard of G. Raney Madison; everybody except the newborn in Somaliland had heard of G. Raney Madison. But we weren't so chummy that I called him G. I not only hadn't met him, but I'd never even seen him, except on the covers of *Fortune*, *Time*, and the local newspapers.

He'd made millions in oil, doubled his money in land, plunged into and out of the stock market, endowed foundations, collected old masters and new impressionists, and even published a best-selling book *The Magnificent Leonardo*, which even I had read and enjoyed.

He was worth at least fifty mil-



lion bucks, I guessed, which must have been a comfort to him.

That was about all I knew of G. Raney Madison, but I was favorably impressed by the minute or so we spent on the phone.

Skiping the usual preliminaries, he said, "I would appreciate it if you could come to my home this evening, Mr. Scott. I would like to discuss an important and highly confidential matter with you."

"Well, I did have something—cooking."

"I considered most of the private investigators in Los Angeles before deciding to phone you. However, if you are unavailable I suppose I can call the number-two man on my list."

I wanted to ask him who the number-two man was. But I guessed it wasn't all that important, not if I was number one. I liked G. Raney already.

"Well—" I said.

"This is extraordinarily important."

I sighed. "I'll come over. Actually, I just had a date tonight, is all. With a woman, I mean. I mean. But she'll forgive me. I hope. Can you tell me what the problem is? On the phone?"

"I'd prefer not. I will say this. I have, shall we say, lost something. Something quite valuable."

"Money?"

"Indirectly. Something worth, roughly, a quarter of a million dollars."

I gulped. "That's pretty rough."

"You will be able to come to my home, then?"

"Almost immediately."

I called Antonia back. "Darling, steel yourself for catastrophe."

"Oh?" She sounded suspicious.

"I can't come over. You'll forgive me, won't you?"

"The hell with you."

"Antonia, you don't mean that. You know I'm like a doctor. Got to be ready—"

"One of your other girls called you, I'll bet a million—"

"I don't know a million girls."

"I meant dollars."

"I don't even know a million dollars. Not yet. Sweet, think of all we've—"

"The hell with you."

"Antonia, darling. Darling? Dar—Why, you pigheaded pizza, you vile tempered tomato, you can't talk to *me* like that!" She'd hung up.

I went into the bedroom again, but this time I didn't go hop-skip. It looked as if another case was starting.

Sometimes my jobs are enjoyable, even fun. But sometimes there are bullets in broad daylight, and knives in the night. Sometimes there is blood and pain and death. You never know.

And I could feel the faint chill, a kind of spine-stretching anticipation, the beginning of that not unpleasant tension which never leaves me entirely until the case is over.

I got my gun harness, strapped it on, shrugged into my coat again. Then I went downstairs and out of the Spartan Apartment Hotel, climbed into my sky-blue Cadillac convertible, and headed for the Bel Air estate of G. Raney Madison.

II

I RARELY HAVE doors opened for me by butlers. This one was tall, thin, and quiet as a shadow. His "Good evening, sir," was as smooth and cold as syrup on yesterday's pancakes, and when I said "Shell Scott," he did not brighten visibly. But he did pull the door open, and I went inside.

Mr. Madison was coming down a wide staircase approximately as far from me as the distance between my front door and my bedroom window. It was not a small house.

We shook hands as he said, "I hope your young lady will forgive you for coming here. You had to break a date?"

"Yeah, I broke it. I shattered it. I may need a signed, notarized statement from you, swearing you're not a wild tomato, but—forget it."

He looked puzzled momentarily, then said, "Shall we go into my den, Mr. Scott?"

It was small and warm. Books halfway up one wall, thick blue carpet, man-sized leather chairs. Two half-charred logs were in a small fireplace. Above the bookshelves the smooth dark panelling of the wall was bare, except for a couple of brackets as though for pictures.

But no pictures.

We sat in the leather chairs and Mr. Madison offered me a cigar. I shook my head, lit a cigarette, and he got his thin cigar going. I knew Madison was fifty-four years old but he could have passed for ten years less than that. He was five-nine or so, slim, skin smooth and his eyes bright. He didn't wear glasses, and still had plenty of hair, dark brown with a little gray in it.

"Are you acquainted with details of the recent auction held at the Hall-Warner Gallery in Pasadena?" he began.

"Auction?"

"Of paintings. Several valuable and well-known works were sold, among others a Gauguin, a minor

El Greco, and a recently discovered drawing by Da Vinci."

I shook my head.

"No matter," he continued. "I purchased the Da Vinci. It was a large, exquisite drawing, a complete study for the Battle of Angiari. It was undoubtedly executed in 1504, and must have been Leonardo's final conception for that magnificent cartoon which, unfortunately, is now lost to us."

"Um," I said. "That one, huh?"

"Yes. At any rate, my successful bid was two hundred and eighty thousand dollars. I had the drawing specially framed and it was delivered here last week. Six days ago to be precise. I hung it there, on the wall."

He indicated the now bare wall. I said, "It's been heisted? Stolen?"

"Precisely. But there are some unusual aspects to this situation. I want the property back not only because it is my property, and not only because of the rather considerable sum of money involved—the Da Vinci is, of course, priceless—but there is something even more important to me than the drawing itself."

He gazed at the glowing ash on his small cigar. "I don't know who stole the Da Vinci. But I do know it must have been taken last night. I flew to San Francisco Tuesday morning and returned early this afternoon. The Da Vinci was on the wall when I left, and on returning I noted its absence. Thus, unless it

was removed this morning sometime, in broad daylight, the theft occurred during the night just past."

I nodded.

"It is possible the thief has already disposed of the drawing. But I—we—must proceed under the assumption that he has not yet delivered the Da Vinci to its intended purchaser."

He paused and looked at me. Expectantly, I thought. I dragged on my cigarette. "The—intended purchaser. I suppose you mean because the thing was so well known, at least among collectors, he could hardly sell it to a museum. Or hawk it from door to door—"

He seemed pained, but interrupted smoothly, "Yes." Almost surely he had a few, or more likely one, prospective buyer in mind before committing the theft."

Madison stood up, walked to the bare wall and looked at the brackets there. With his back to me he continued, "I would like to employ you to accomplish three things. One, recover the Da Vinci. Two, apprehend the thief. Three—and I stress that this is most important—discover who buys, or receives, the Da Vinci from the thief. That is, if indeed the buyer was aware prior to the theft that the theft was going to be committed, you are to reveal to me, but to no one else, his identity."

I stubbed out my cigarette. This was getting a little complicated. I

opened my mouth, but Madison wasn't through.

After a brief pause he went on. "This must be accomplished with the utmost—shall I say delicacy? By that I mean without publicity, certainly without notoriety."

"Well, I'm not exactly notorious for my delicacy—"

"I am fully aware of that. And I realize I am making this difficult for you. I've no idea how you may be able to accomplish what I ask, or if it will be possible at all. That is your problem, Mr. Scott."

"Yeah. It's quite a—yeah."

"That is precisely why I called you, in preference to several others. Because of your peculiar skill, or luck, or whatever it may be that has enabled you to achieve results which, on some occasions at least, appeared exceedingly remote in the beginning."

Madison paused. "I am also aware that at times you employ methods which are unusual. But this is an unusual affair, and I am interested solely in results. I am not concerned with what methods you may use, only that there be no outcry, no public awareness of your investigation or its results."

"Surely the police—"

"The police do not know of the theft. I do not intend that they shall know. At least not until you have successfully performed the task, or failed in its performance."

"Mr. Madison, if a felony has been committed—"



He swung around. "If a felony has been committed, Mr. Scott, only those responsible, and I, know of it. We, and now you. If I prefer not to make an official complaint about the theft of my own property, that should surely be my prerogative."

He paused, but I didn't say anything. It seemed clear there was more to come.

He asked me, "Under these circumstances would you like to undertake the task for me?"

I had to think about it for a minute. It was Madison's rather odd desire to keep the whole thing so clammed up that bugged me. But finally I said, "It's your money."

"Are you concerned about your fee?"

I raised my eyebrows. "No. I was thinking about the other angles. My usual fee, and expenses, will be perfectly—"

"The fee, too, will be somewhat unusual, Mr. Scott. Perhaps I should have mentioned this sooner." He reached toward a small table near him and rolled ash from his cigar. "If you fail in all particu-

lars, I intend to pay you nothing. If you fail in other particulars but do recover the Da Vinci, I shall pay you five thousand dollars. Plus, of course, your expenses. If, however, you conclude your investigation to my entire satisfaction, in all particulars which I have mentioned, I shall consider the amount legitimately due you no less than ten percent of the price I paid for the Da Vinci."

Ten percent made it easy to figure—\$28,000. I stood up, walked across the room to G. Raney Madison, and held out my hand.

"You talk a language I like," I said. "A foreign language."

He shook my hand. "Nothing whatever, you understand, if you botch it."

"Please. Let's not even think about botching it." I tried to think for a minute about something else. "Well, now that I'm hired, quite possibly for a fee of nothing, can you tell me why all the secrecy and such? If I'd lost something worth over a quarter of a million bucks, I'd be setting alarm bells off all over town."

"Yes, but the alarm did not go off."

I started getting it then.

Madison explained. Cleverly concealed at a point above us in the ceiling was a cell which beamed a ray of infra-red light—invisible to the human eye—down to the drawing, or rather, to the spot where the Da Vinci had been. If the drawing

were to be removed, the beam would be broken and a circuit closed, not only setting off a noise like noon in an alarm-clock factory, but triggering another signal in the Beverly Hills police station. There had been no alarm.

This kind of setup wasn't unfamiliar to me. I had recently installed a somewhat similar beam inside my apartment aimed at the door, so I could tell if, during my absence, anybody invited himself in. Or herself. I like to be prepared for any emergency. Mine didn't start gongs gonging, but merely caused a little metal flag to flop down over the keyhole of the lock on my apartment door.

"I see," I said. "So who knew about this rig besides you?"

"My wife and our son, and a close friend of mine, Mr. James Chance. The control switches are in this room, but I assure you only someone quite familiar with the alarm system could have found and disabled them, for the control itself is similarly guarded."

"So which one do you think tipped the thief? Or perhaps was the thief?"

"Certainly not my wife or son. But—" He sighed. "Neither can I believe it was Jim Chance." We walked back to our chairs and sat down as he went on, "I have your solemn word you will divulge nothing of what I now say to anyone?"

"You do."

"It is possible a clever thief man-

aged to get in here, and out with the Da Vinci, without prior knowledge of the alarm systems, I suppose. If so, it is beyond my understanding. It is almost but not quite beyond my understanding that Jim—Mr. Chance—provided the thief with that prior knowledge."

He chewed at a little piece of skin on his lip. "I must know, one way or the other. However, I must also insist there be *no* possibility that suspicion arise in any other mind but my own—and of course yours. Unless he proves to be guilty in fact."

"O.K. I won't let out a peep."

"I require more of you than—"

He smiled for the first time. "—not peeping. Should Mr. Chance become aware that you suspect him, he might, ah, lose heart. If he *is* involved, and *does* intend to go through with this matter, I want him actually to go through with it. I want to know. I want no doubt in my mind."

"You're making this pretty tough."

"I didn't say it would be easy."

"I mean on both of us. If I do this your way, or try to, you're taking a fat chance of throwing the whole ball game. Including the Da Vinci. Hell, I'd practically have to catch them in the act of trading a bagful of U.S. green-stamps for the drawing before you could be sure."

"Precisely. Understand this, Mr. Scott. I would prefer that I lose the Da Vinci than that you, by your

actions, should so alarm Mr. Chance that he would, shall we say, run for cover. I might then never know if my suspicions are false or well founded."

"That means I'll have to concentrate almost entirely on the thief, assuming he's somebody else. And I can't even shake him up too much. Well, I'll play it by ear. But here's another thing. You can't very well give the insurance boys this kind of—"

"There will be no insurance investigators."

I blinked. "You mean the Da Vince wasn't covered?"

"Of course it was."

"I don't get—"

"As you started to say yourself, I could not place such restrictions upon the insurer and expect to hold them liable if recovery were unsuccessful. Since I prefer not to reveal to anyone else what I have told you tonight, I do not intend to report the Da Vinci as stolen."

He paused. "But that's academic now. Under the terms of the policy, I have already too long withheld notification, since my discovery of the loss." He looked at a slim silver watch on his left wrist. "Twenty minutes ago, the policy became invalid."

I lit another cigarette and had two big drags from it before speaking. Then I looked at Madison. "You must think a hell of a lot of this Chance character."

"Indeed I do."

"Next question. If he's such a delight, why are you ninety-nine percent convinced he's a thief?"

"Not quite ninety-nine percent, Mr. Scott. However, Jim and I have been friends for sixteen years. In the beginning we were business associates; he worked for me. I need not go into details, but fourteen years ago he stole a considerable sum of money from me—that is, from my company. I discovered the theft, but did not prosecute him. He returned the money. He straightened out and over the years our friendship became very close and rewarding. But I was never certain he had forgiven me"—he smiled again—"for forgiving him."

"My final point. At the Hall-Warner auction last month there were initially several bidders for the Da Vinci. At the end there remained only Mr. Theodore Finster, Mr. Chance, and myself. Mr. Finster quit at one-ninety, but Jim continued, bidding against me. He stopped at two-seventy, and the Da Vinci was mine for a bid of two-eighty."

Madison got up, began pacing the floor. "Jim seemed, even then, exceptionally resentful. I've—well, I've always had more money than he. At any rate, there has been a noticeable coolness between us since then. I haven't even seen or spoken to him for more than a week. The auction itself, considered not merely as an isolated event but as, perhaps, the climax

to many small irritations over the years—" He didn't finish.

He didn't have to. The reasons for his conclusions were Madison's own business; my business was to do what he wanted done, if possible.

So I got on with my own business. "Who was in the house last night, Mr. Madison?"

"No one. That is, only Sterling. Both my wife and George, Jr., my son, went with me to San Francisco."

"Sterling?"

"My butler."

"Ah, the butler. Well?"

"Oh! Yes. Sterling is the only other person who could have known of the alarms."

"The people who installed it?"

"Damn," he said abruptly. "Yes, Ladd Electronics. Mr. Ladd himself supplied the equipment and did the work. The field is hardly narrowing, is it?"

"It usually doesn't."

We talked a few minutes longer. Finally I said, "Well, I'll have at it your way, Mr. Madison. It still wows me a little, the chance you're taking with all that money."

"I'm not really concerned about the money," he said. "I'm naturally anxious to get the Da Vinci back. But I've never been much interested in money."

Ha, I thought. He can afford it. Who's interested in turkey after Thanksgiving? But then I thought, why not? Could be. Some guys

don't even like money. Some guys don't like women. Some guys are nuts.

Madison was going on, "It's Jim Chance I want to know about."

"I hope it's the butler," I said. When he smiled I added, "I can't help saying, if this James Chance did break it off in you, or put somebody else up to it, he must be lower than a snake in Death Valley."

He blinked. "How very odd you should use that expression." He reached to the table on his left and picked up a small brown book, half hidden behind a heavy marble ashtray. "Before I phoned you I was reading—" He flipped the pages. "This is a translation of an old, old manuscript, Mr. Scott. From Tibet, I believe. Ah, here it is. 'The serpent loseth not his sting though benumbed with the frost; the tooth of the viper is not broken though the cold closeth his mouth; take pity on his state and he will show thee his spirit; warm him in thy bosom, and he will requite thee with death.'"

At that moment G. Raney Madison looked all of his fifty-four years, and then some. He said slowly, "I need not, I suppose, tell you that I have been disturbed for some time, and am greatly disturbed now, wondering if I did the right thing those many years ago. It's—a long time not to be sure."

We were quiet for a few moments, then I said, "Well, aside from James Chance, there's jolly

Sterling, the butler, whom I've already met. And Ladd. Your wife and son at home?"

"Yes. Would you like to meet them?"

"Sure."

"I think it wise. You may have to call here numerous times."

"Do they know why I'm here?"

"No. And I would prefer, Mr. Scott, that you say nothing to them about it."

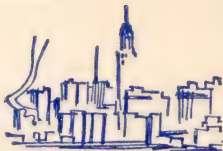
I smiled sadly. Pretty quick he was going to tell me to conduct a dynamic, intensive investigation, only not to do anything. I'd be like the guy who invented a perpetual motion machine and couldn't get it started.

"They're in the library. You can tell them you dropped in for a glass of sherry."

"For a what?"

But he was leading the way out of his den. Into the hallway, past about five doors, around the foot of that staircase, by a half-dozen more rooms—did I say it was not a small house?—and finally through a pair of ten-foot-high carved-oak doors into an octagonal room lined on six sides with about a billion books.

Mrs. Madison and George, Jr., were no more than fifty feet away seated on a long, burnt-orange divan. We started toward them. I had lots of time to think of what I'd say. Man, I thought, if a guy forgot where he left his book, he'd be too pooped to read it when he



found it. Then G. Raney Madison was performing the introductions, and I shook hands with Mrs. Madison and their son.

He was younger than I'd expected, possibly not even twenty-one yet, with a look of a lad just recovering from tuberculosis. He was thin-faced, pale, soft, as if made of milk on the verge of clabbering. His hair was very long, fluffy, over his ears and on his neck.

About that hair: We've apparently entered an era in which a good chunk of the young and not-so-young male population is doing its damndest to look girlish—and succeeding—while the girls are cutting their hair short, wearing un-feminine garb, and egging the girlish-boys on. There are male trios in which voiceless singers mouth the top teenage hits, all of which sound like the same song played in different keys, wearing dirty sport shirts and velvet stretch pants and doing little bumps on the high notes and grinds the rest of the time. Any day now they'll appear wearing topless Bikinis and panties.

Well, you can take it or leave it—I'll leave it—but it's happening, and a lot of otherwise sensible people are joining the movement. George Raney Madison, Jr., appeared to have joined up.

It's important, I suppose, to be long; but I figure it's even more important what you belong to. Not that George Junior looked like a girl; he didn't. But he didn't look a hell of a lot like a dashing young man, either.

Mrs. Madison looked like a girl, all right, or, rather, a woman. An exceptionally good-looking woman. She was no spring chicken—I guessed she was five years younger than her husband—but she still had a good figure and a very lovely face.

The three of us mumbled the usual inanities while Mr. Madison poured sherry from a cut-glass decanter. Ordinarily I would no more have touched sherry at that hour than I would have stood on my head in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard during the rush hour. But this, I supposed, was my excuse for being here at all. According to G. Raney, at least.

There was a rather thick silence. Then Mrs. Madison smiled sweetly and said, "You haven't been here before, have you, Mr. Scott?"

"No, ma'am. I just dropped in for a glass—"

I couldn't say it. It would be a *lie*. And I'd rather chop down a cherry tree than tell a *lie*.

"Fact is," I said smoothly, "I just dropped in to chew the fat with old G."

Gee, it sounded good. It even felt good. Here I was trading gay repartee with fifty, or maybe a hundred million dollars.

Well, you could have heard a gnat's wing drop off and thud on the floor. Quiet? Like Death, dead and buried. It lasted a while. It lasted forever.

Gulp, down went my cherry.

The silence lasted until G. Raney Madison, Jr., said something. Just one word. It was not a lovely word. No, not at all lovely. Actually, it was a word I never use, even when talking to myself. It's O.K. for school kids, for collegiate post-adolescents, say, and boy singers who wear their hair long and do little bumps and grinds. But not for me.

"Ha-ha," I said, laughing mirthlessly. "Young man, you should wash out your mouth with new improved soap."

Mrs. Madison mumbled something nice, then took her son's pale hand and led him from the room. Not to paddle him, I'll bet. There was a little more silence.

I sighed, squared my shoulders, turned to Mr. Madison and said, "Well, it looks like we started out miserable, then lost our rapport. Am I fired?"

His eyes were squeezed shut and for a second I thought it was a symptom of the furious-Dad bit.

But he was laughing, trying to keep the sound muffled. In a few moments he said, "By God, he should wash out his mouth with hydrochloric acid, if the truth be told."

He sighed. "I'm afraid we've been a bit lenient with George, in some ways. But—well, I didn't want him to turn into a spoiled rich man's son, ruined by money before he understood its value. I've kept him on a rigid allowance, tried to teach him the value of a dollar, but I think we've both been too lenient with him in—other ways. I don't know. Young people these days—" He let it drop, then went on, "Ah, Mr. Scott, that was refreshing. You've given me my first moment of jollity for, well, for a long time."

"You mean I'm not fired?" I asked."

"Certainly not. On the contrary, would you care to have a talk with George in regard—"

"Sir, I realize he's your son, but I would none the less prefer to stay fifty miles—"

Madison interrupted, "George is like my own son. He *is* my son. But he's adopted, you know. When he was a year old—but you wouldn't know that, would you?"

"No, sir. I did think he seemed, um, cast from a different mold, so to speak." He had looked very moldy, I thought.

"We've much in common, to be sure. But in some ways I've never been able to understand him."

We chatted a while longer, and he chuckled a little more; then Mr. Madison grinned at me and said, "Would you like some more sherry?"

I grinned back at him. "I guess you know what you can do with your sherry."

He laughed again, and I left. At least the case was starting out fun.

But as I walked through darkness toward my Cad, one phrase still lingered in my mind, from the bit G. Raney Madison had read. It was: "—requite thee with death."

That and, mingled with it, the memory of Mr. Madison's long suppressed laughter.

III

NEXT TO MY gun, the most valuable part of my investigator's equipment is a list of names, some in a little book, some in my head. Informants, tipsters, men and women both inside and outside the rackets, all of whom have given me—or some day may give me—the 'information' which breaks ninety percent of the cases investigated by anybody, whether policeman or private citizen.

On most burglaries, stickups, or crimes of violence, I would have gotten in touch with anywhere from half a dozen to a dozen of those on my list. But for a caper like this one there were only two men I wanted to see. If any word at all was floating around—word

about an art heist, a big score last night—they were the two most likely to have heard about it.

I found Lupo first. He was where I expected to find him, in Dolly's, a small bar well out the Sunset Strip. Dolly's was not the kind of club I usually frequented, because one rarely saw lovely tomatoes in low-cut gowns in this place. There were generally lots of handsome fellows, but I don't give a hang about looking at lots of handsome fellows.

Not many customers were present this early in the evening, and I spotted Lupo right away. He and a heavy-set, soft-looking old duck were seated alone at the end of the bar, jawing and having a drink. I glanced around, to pick out an empty booth, and when I looked back at Lupo he'd spotted me and was walking my way.

He was a tall, slim, goodlooking man, about my age, thirty, with a brilliant smile and exceptionally long black lashes over dark eyes. He himself had been in the art-heisting dodge several years back, which was why I'd hunted him down.

He'd found the racket too rich for his blood, however—especially after one jolt on the county—and now put his knowledge of the old and new masters to use from the other side of the law, and the other side of the counter, in *Fancinni's*, *Fine Arts*, on Wilshire Boulevard. But he still knew most of his old

cronies, kept his ears open, and didn't object to a sawbuck, or even a C-note, from me on occasion.

"Hello, Scott," he said—a bit nervously, I thought. A lot of guys get nervous around an investigator, public or private; but it could have been that we were both aware I wasn't exactly in my element, not in Dolly's.

"I need a little help, Lupo. Can we grab a booth while I tell you about it?"

"Sure." He weaved through tables to an empty booth against the wall, and I said, "Didn't mean to break up a conversation, but this won't take long."

I glanced around, but the guy Lupo had been talking to wasn't at the bar now. Maybe he'd recognized me and thought I was here to put the arm on the joint.

But Lupo said, "Conversation? Oh, that was just some chap—don't even know his name. Just in for a drink." He grinned "Wanted to know if there was a strip tease."

That was a laugh. I wondered what Lupo had told him. We ordered drinks, and after making sure nobody was bending an ear nearby, I said, "You hear anything about an art heist last night?"

He didn't answer right away. Then he said, "Like what?"

"A big one. Must've run to two hundred and fifty G's. Place they hit was in Bel Air."

That was all I told him, and all I meant to tell him, at least for the moment. When you're looking for a specific item and describe it to an informant, occasionally one of them will come back with a fascinating tale about that item, making it sound very authentic by including the identical details you earlier told him. Besides, I wasn't quite sure about Lupo yet.

We'd been acquainted for over a year. He'd passed on a few tips to me in that time, but none of them had panned out. Something was always missing.

That's not particularly unusual in my business. Once in a while you nurse an informant along for months, even years, and then one short sentence from him saves you a week of legwork, or breaks a case, or maybe even keeps you from getting sapped—or shot—in the head.

Besides, I liked Lupo, enjoyed talking to him. He was a kick, quick spoken and witty, undeniably brilliant, an upbeat kind of guy.

He shook his head. "Have you got a lead to anybody, Scott?"

"Not yet. My guess is it was one of four guys. Luigi, Bonicef, Spaniel—make it three."

I'd just remembered the fourth man I'd had in mind could be eliminated. He was doing five to life at Folsom. So, unless somebody new was operating locally, these three fitted the job in my

book: Alston Spaniel, a tall, slim satyr with an insatiable appetite for other people's art objects, including women; goateed Guy Bonicef, ex-artist, ex-art teacher, and ex-inmate of San Quentin; and an old, but still slick, three-time loser named Luigi.

While not averse to picking up a poke of cash or the family jewels, if opportunity knocked, each of them specialized in works of or *objets d'art*: valuable paintings, ancient Chinese jade, Ming-dynasty vases, and such pretties.

Lupo ran the tip of an index finger over his right eyebrow.

"I haven't heard anything," he said slowly. "At least not anything definite." He was silent for a while. "Not about a job, I mean. Nothing about Bel Air."

"You sound like you've got something."

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's nothing. It's just I know Al Spaniel's down on his uppers. No score for a long, long time for Al."

That checked with what I knew. Spaniel had, so the story went, been living off the last of his ill-gotten gains for several months, and the living was getting lean. Moreover, Spaniel was a man who liked to live high. He usually spent more on busty babes than most men spend on home, job, family, and life insurance.

"That's no news, Lupo," I said. "And it doesn't mean he'd get reckless, unless he's really broke."

"Worse than broke, the way it reached me. I hear he's into Joe Pappa for five thousand. Which is now about seven thousand. Is that news, Scott?"

"Yeah. He was that broke, huh?"

"Broke for him. They say Al met one of those fat redheads he goes for. You know Al."

I did know Al. There was no secret about Al. And Lupo's describing whomever Al had met as a "fat redhead" was merely Lupo expressing *his* opinion. It is almost a certainty that, if I could see her, I would not even think of describing her as a fat redhead. Nor would Al.

"Five G's, huh?" I said. "Not small change, that."

Joe Pappa was an unofficial bank. He'd lend a guy money at ten percent. Ten percent a week. You didn't have to pay it all back at once. He'd settle for ten percent interest and then the principal, or a hundred percent of your blood. People should never borrow from the Joe Pappas. But they do. And a guy like Spaniel, if he saw a really "fat" redhead, and needed loot for the conquest, would not only borrow from a Joe Pappa but promise to pay off in transfusions.

He was, indisputably, possessed of a gargantuan sexual appetite; satyr, freak, or man with a genital tapeworm, whatever the cause of his elephantine libido, it was said he had the virility of a stone

statue and the perseverance in pursuit of an aphrodisiacal Javert. Or, in the language of his cohorts and those in illegal cahoots, Alston Spaniel was remarked as the horniest citizen in at least one and possibly several counties.

"Hmm," I said. "Where would I find them? I mean, Alston and his new passion flame?"

"That I don't know, Scott."

"Think you could find out?"

"I could try."

"Try."

"What was the score?"

"Art, from Bel Air." I grinned at him. "Surely you've guessed, Lupo. I want you to find out and tell me."

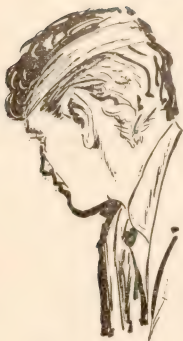
He grinned back. "You want me to do your job, you mean."

"Exactly. And keep your ears open in case interesting news is fluttering in the smog. O.K.?"

"O.K."

IV

IT TOOK ME an hour to run down my second informant, an ex-con named Zeke, and the dialogue was about the same as it had been with Lupo, except that my second man didn't know anything, not even about Alston's recent indebtedness. Didn't know, but would go amongst 'em and look and listen, and maybe ask a question from time to time. That was good enough for me, because Zeke was, among my informants, a kind



of lieutenant, with a number of privates who reported to him.

That done, I headed for North Rossmore and the Spartan Apartment Hotel. The night was far from over; in fact it was only beginning for me. But I wanted to grab a sandwich at the apartment and get some calories in me while I used the phone. There were still a few more lines to put out.

I left the car in front of the Spartan, trotted in and got my key at the desk, then walked slowly up to 212, thinking. I was jabbing the key at the keyhole when I noticed the little metal flag over the keyhole. It looked like part of the lock, part of the design. Only I knew it shouldn't have been in

evidence unless somebody, while I was out, had let himself in.

Or, of course herself.

Actually, the only previous time my little alarm system had tipped me to somebody's presence inside, I had sprung in with my .38 Colt Special ready and cocked and had come within an inch of shooting a gorgeous belle named Lucretia, an acrobatic dancer who in the moment of my bursting-in became more acrobatic than even she, in her dizziest dreams, had dreamed she could become.

The desk clerk had let her in, gasp, she'd said. He must have, gasp, forgotten to tell me. I was still thinking about that when I went in this time, so I was smiling. Oh, I did it right. Key in the lock silently, door open and me bent low and inside in a hurry. But the basically amusing episode was still in my thoughts, so I guess I was still smiling when I shot the guy.

He was standing near the wall on my right, gun in his hand. In his hand, but not pointed at me. He'd been waiting for a sound, probably the key in the lock, knob turning, and hadn't heard it—not in time.

He was a big man, with the pale face that comes from avoiding sunlight—or from a stretch in stir. He moved suddenly, whipping the gun toward me like a man starting to throw a ball. I pumped two into him before he could get the gun aimed at me

and I saw him bend forward as his eyes closed.

He didn't go down, but his gun arm kept moving, toward me and past, sinking toward the floor. But the heat was still in his hand and I fired one more slug into his chest. Then he dropped the gun.

He staggered back, hit the wall. His eyes opened. Slowly he slid down until his seat hit the floor. His arms hung limp at his sides, backs of his hands on my yellow-gold carpet, palms up and fingers curling. Blood gushed up into his throat and slid over his lower lip.

I jumped to him, kicked his gun farther away and said, "Was this your idea, or did somebody send you?"

He blinked at me, licked his wet lips.

"Where'd you come from?" he said. The words were quite clear.

He didn't know how bad he was hit. Sometimes it's like that, the shock dulls pain, dulls comprehension. He didn't know; but I thought I did. I gave him a minute, or seconds. These were the last sweet moments of his life.

"Hurry up," I said.

I raised the gun toward his face, thumbed back the hammer again. He coughed.

"Wasn't my idea," he said. "It was a job. A G now, and—" His head went back suddenly, then rolled a little to the side. In a couple of seconds he was looking at me again, but there was some-

thing in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Spill," I said. "Or do you want one in the teeth? Who sent you here? Who hired you?"

"Spaniel. He told me his name was Al Spaniel. Give me the G and said—" He stopped.

Now we both knew.

Nothing more was said. Even if he could have spoken, I imagine he was too busy thinking to speak. Too much to think about, and too little time. Well, they should think about that before they start dying in another guy's room.

His eyes didn't close. He just slumped back a little more and slid sideways down the wall, head turning on a rubbery neck. His dark hair left a faint smear of oil behind him.

I looked him over, checked his pulse, his pupils. He wasn't out; he was dead.

I was at the phone and dialing before it hit me.

I hung up as a racket sounded in the hallway. Thumping feet, shouts. It took me a minute to calm the startled tenants, shoo most of them away and shut the door on the few remaining. Then I went back and stood by the phone again. But I didn't dial.

Al Spaniel? It made sense, if he'd made a quarter-million score and knew I was looking for him—

But how had he known? Madison? Hardly. Surely not Zeke; I'd done business with him a long

time. His tips had paid off, and I'd paid him plenty.

I'd call the police, yes. But I'd have to take a chance that it could wait for a little while. There was something else that couldn't wait.

I started looking for Lupo.

V

LUPO'S FACE rested on the table in our booth at The Happy Time; his breath rippled the spilled liquid shining on the table top and sopping into his left eyebrow. In a moment his eyelids fluttered. He sighed.

When he finally got his head up and looked at me, I thought he was going to faint again. But he didn't. Not quite.

"I'll tell you how it was, Lupo," I said sweetly. "Then you fill me in on the details. That all right with you, Lupo?"

He nodded, swallowing. His lips looked chapped.

I said, "You've never yet given me a tip that paid off. I figured it would take time, that's all. What I didn't figure was that when I asked you about a guy, instead of trying to help *me* you might be tipping the guy I *asked* about. Like tonight, huh, Lupo?"

He finally said something. "That's nuts."

I grinned. "A hood just tried to shoot me, and died trying. But he lived long enough to spill that Al Spaniel sent him to hit me. That

not only tells me Spaniel is the joker I'm after, but it tells me something else, Lupo. Guess what it is."

"I—couldn't guess."

"I talked to two men tonight, about the heist and about my suspicions of Spaniel. One of those men must have got that word to Spaniel. I didn't tell him. Who could have told him, Lupo?"

He shook his head.

"Maybe I only talked to you, friend. Maybe you're the only one who could have told him. You think of that?"

He hadn't. But he was thinking about it now. I thought I might have to work on him a while longer, but he said suddenly, "All right, Scott. Just take it easy. I—I'll tell you. What'll you do?"

"To you? Well, at least I won't kill you." I paused. "What did *you* do, Lupo? Call all three of them? Spaniel and Bonicef and Luigi, to be sure you tipped the right one?"

He opened his mouth, shut it. Then he said, "I was pretty sure it must have been Spaniel. I would have called the other two, sure, but there wasn't any need to. I talked to Spaniel first thing, called him. The way he reacted, it had to be him."

"I'd already figured that out."

"Scott, I swear it never entered my mind he might try to have you killed. I thought he'd probably blow town. Who'd think he'd send anybody to—" He let it trail off.

"O.K., where is he?"

"Where? I wouldn't know—"

"Knock it off, Lupo. You knew where to find him when you wanted to tip him. So you know where to find him now."

He was silent for a few seconds, then shrugged. "That does make sense, doesn't it? All right. He was at the Westmoreland Hotel."

"That's where you phoned him?"

"Phoned, then went there to see him. He was with one of those obscenely fat women he's always got hanging around."

I grinned. He described the woman in more detail. By sort of listening between the lines she shaped up as a wow. Five-five or six, a lot of red hair, green eyes, and 'obscenely' shapely.

"They're at the Westmoreland now?" I asked him.

Lupo hesitated. I said, "If you hold anything out, pal, anything at all—"

"Well, that's where they were. But when I talked to Alston I got the impression he was going to leave within a very short time for Laguna Beach."

"How'd you get the impression?"

"He—actually, he told me."

"Thinking, of course, that I wouldn't find out. Not in this life. Or maybe if something went wrong and his hired gun missed me, I wouldn't be able to find him. Right?"

"Scott, I swear, I didn't have any idea—"

"Yeah, skip it. Where in Laguna Beach? And how come he spilled his whole itinerary to you?"

"The Seawinds. Why? I didn't want to lose track of him. He's supposed to—" Lupo stopped, swallowed, but continued gamely, "supposed to pay me for the information."

"With what? I thought he was flat."

"That's the point. I didn't think he'd have much cash handy. But he said by tomorrow or the next day he'd have plenty, and he'd take care of me. So I, naturally, wanted to know how I could keep in touch with him. He said he'd be at the Seawinds for a day or two."

"Why Laguna? Any special reason?"

Lupo shook his head. "I figured he just wanted to be out of the city."

"How was he going to get all this loot—and from whom?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"He didn't tell you what the score was?"

"No."

"You still don't have any idea what Spaniel heisted, huh?"

Lupo shook his head. "Just what you said yourself. I mean a big heist in Bel Air. An art job. I mentioned that to him, and said you were looking for him. But he didn't spill anything to me."

"No. You just spilled your guts to him. Lupo, I ought to plug you right between the eyes."

He shuddered delicately, pressed a few drops of highball from his left eyebrow with the tip of a well-manicured index finger. I asked him if Spaniel had pulled the job alone or with somebody else's help, but he said he'd told me everything he knew. I hoped he had.

So I said, "You think you can manage not to shoot your mouth off for a while? Or will I have to shoot it off for you?"

"I won't make the same mistake twice."

"Let's both hope it's the truth, Lupo. Because if Spaniel finds out you've filled me in, I'm not even going to worry about him. At least not until I find you again, friend."

"You don't have to worry. I swear—"

I left him in the booth, still swearing fidelity to me. Undying fidelity.

VI

L AGUNA BEACH is a small, lovely town on the coast, about an hour's drive from Los Angeles if you hurry. I'd hurried, but there hadn't been much point in it because I didn't get started until well after the sun was up.

When I'd got back to the Spartan after talking to Lupo, two police officers were waiting for me



in my apartment. The dead guy was gone, but traces of him remained. And traces of dudgeon remained in the two officers. For, not I, but somebody else at the Spartan had phoned the law, and policemen feel that when somebody, even one so well known to them as I, shoots a guy he should stick around to explain why he found it convenient to shoot him.

Consequently I had to spend more time than would ordinarily have been the case telling my story and sitting on a hard chair in an interrogation room downtown. The whole thing was made somewhat more difficult because I couldn't mention the fact that I was working for G. Raney Madison, or explain why I felt the hood had been waiting for me. At least I couldn't and keep my word to Madison. So I didn't.

It was finally over, about seven in the morning. By the time I'd cleaned up and driven to the coast, the day was well along. It was a lovely day. Sun sparks flashed from the blue sea, and only a faint haze of distant smog blurred the horizon. At three P.M., parked on South Coast Boulevard, across the street and about half a block from the Seawinds, I got my first look—recent look, that is—at Alston Spaniel.

The Seawinds sprawled along a hundred yards of choice property on the ocean front side of Coast Boulevard. I'd already been over

there. From a desk clerk I'd learned that a man answering Alston Spaniel's description had checked in last night, and was in Suite B on the top tier of the hotel.

He answered the description, but was registered as William Simms, which I thought was sly of him. The suite was forty bucks a day, so Alston wasn't living like a man without money—or at least without prospects. Not if he could afford to pay eighty bucks a day for rooms.

Eighty, since twice forty is eighty, and suite C last night had become occupied by what the clerk described as "a helluva good-looking redhead." She'd registered as Miss Ardith Mellow. No. She hadn't been with Mr. Simms, at least not so far as the clerk knew.

I almost missed Alston when he came into view and climbed into a three-year-old Lincoln. I had the top up on the Cad, but it was a warm day and the sun pounded the canvas over my head. More, I'd done no sleeping last night, and my eyes were starting to feel like toasted marshmallows.

With the Lincoln's door open, Alston turned and waved to somebody near the steps leading down toward the beach, then climbed in and started to pull out of the curving driveway and into the Boulevard. I got a glimpse of a girl waving back—some red hair and what appeared to be a very wavy figure—but then I ducked down as

the Lincoln went by me. I let it get a block away, then pulled into the light traffic myself.

It was possible that I was wasting my time. Assuming, of course, that Alston had indeed lifted the Da Vinci, he might be in Laguna not to dispose of it, nor merely to lie low, but for the fun of spending some of his already ill-gotten gains.

But I had to go ahead under the assumption that he'd not yet got rid of the drawing and that completion of the score still lay somewhere in the future. Besides, Lupo had told me Spaniel expected sizable loot "by tomorrow or the next day."

So, though I would much have preferred to grab him and hit him for a while, the way housewives pound on tough steaks to tenderize them, I merely followed him.

He didn't go far. We were headed north, back toward the small business district, and before reaching the stop light at the corner of Coast and Laguna Avenue, he swung left into the parking lot next to the Laguna Hotel. I was lucky enough to find a slot at the curb around the corner on Laguna, and was out of the car in time to spot Spaniel striding toward the double glass doors at the hotel's front.

Striding was the word. He was a tall, broad-shouldered and lean-hipped cat, and he moved with a long easy swing of leg, cleft chin thrust forward and splitting the air like the prow of a boat. He

was undeniably a vital, handsome slob, and always looked like a guy bursting with vitamins and on his way to a wild party, which he usually was.

When he went through the doors, I caught the green light and trotted across the street, entered the hotel lobby as he stepped into the elevator. It was just past the desk beyond the stairs on my right, and when the indicator stopped at "3," I started up the stairs.

I almost trotted up them too fast. Spaniel was still in the hallway when I reached the third floor, and I clumped to a stop, waited, then peered around the edge of the wall. I saw him knock softly, glance around, then look back at the door as it opened.

"Al, darling!"

Yeah. Everywhere the son went, it was "Al, darling!" This one wasn't a redhead. She came out in the hall far enough so I got a good look, and Al got a good squeeze and an enormously healthy smooch on the chops, which in my book put him several chapters ahead of me, especially since I was using only one eye.

The woman was between twenty-five and thirty years old, with a sensual face and an exceedingly feminine figure, including what Lupo might have called a great deal of too-much-fat displayed at the convex V of the kind of cocktail dress gals wear when they know they'll be drinking

double Martinis with dear friends. Or with Alston Spaniel. Her hair was piled high on top of her head, and was black.

So either she wore a wig or wasn't a redhead, I told myself. So what the hell was Alston doing? More important, what the hell was I doing? The latter question was more important not only because I had a hunch I *knew* what he was doing, but because I couldn't simply tail Spaniel around peeking to see what he might be up to.

If he had the Da Vinci stashed somewhere, he'd hardly lug it around and make a meet in broad daylight. And even if he should, I wasn't supposed to shake him up and possibly queer the deal. The deal was supposed to be consummated, the transfer actually made.

For a moment I swore under my breath. Maybe part of it was directed at Alston Spaniel, but part was for G. Raney Madison and his goofy conditions. It seemed the only way I could handle this in a fashion to please Madison was to be miles away when the switch was accomplished, but still know who it was that Spaniel met. And that was imposs . . . Something flickered in my mind, flickered and vanished.

I carry a lot of junk in the trunk of my Cad—electronic equipment, bugs, infra-red gear, a squawk box, dozens of other items occasionally of value in my work. But running over the stuff in my

thoughts didn't help. There was always a chance, I supposed, that I could stick a squawk box under the frame of Spaniel's Lincoln, then, using a small receiver, tail him, following the signal from a distance.

But the switch, if made, would probably be accomplished in a hell of a hurry, in which case I could wind up with a tail on Spaniel and no idea of whom he'd met. I didn't much like it. That wasn't what had flickered in my mind anyway.

I let it simmer, checked the number of the room into which Spaniel had gone, then in the lobby again stopped at the desk. A Mrs. Ingrid Otterman was in the room, I was told.

"Mrs. Otterman? Did she just check in?"

"No, she's been with us for several months now."

"Is her husband with her?"

"No, she's alone. She is, I believe, a widow."

I'll bet I know what killed him, I thought, but merely thanked the clerk and left—to see the clerk at the Seawinds.

A different man was on, not the one I'd talked to this morning. This one didn't know what Ardith Mellow looked like. So I went to Suite C and knocked. No answer.

I tried the doorknob, and it turned. Well, if the joint was unlocked, it was at least even money I'd find no quarter-of-a-million-buck Da Vinci inside. But I look-

ed anyhow. I was right, no Da Vinci.

I did find a connecting door between suits B and C, but that failed to surprise me much, either. Fifteen minutes later I'd tossed both Spaniel's suite and Ardith Mellow's without learning anything. Except that Alston had only two suits and a sports outfit, all of it from a good custom tailor's on Sunset Boulevard. And Ardith Mellow had lots of frilly things along, including several lacy brassieres, all of them labeled 38-C, which to those who have never read a brassiere from the inside



may not mean much, but in truth does mean much.

Each suite had a separate sitting room and splendid view of the blue sea and white combers breaking fifty yards away, a bedroom, and adjacent to the bedroom, a sparkling tiled bathroom including a tiled tub. Ardith's—I was by now thinking of her as Ardith—bedroom and bath were much more interesting. On the bedroom

dresser were several kinds of makeup, creams and sprays, combs and brushes and such, and a huge box of powder—named Caress!, which had a maddeningly fetching scent, and a great big purple powder pug. It was time, I decided, to meet Ardith Mellow if for no other reason than to smell her.

At the base of the Seawinds, just above the sand, was the dining room, and before the dining room's glass wall, facing the beach and sea, was a long bar. This time of day only half a dozen people were at the bar, but one of them was a redhead. Maybe not *the* redhead, but certainly fashioned like all I'd been led to expect of Ardith. Besides, I figured she was either 38-C or 39-B-plus, which was a fat clue.

She was at the end of the bar on my left, with several empty places next to her, so I strolled down and climbed onto a stool, leaving one empty between us. She was drinking something green in a Martini glass. Green like her eyes, I noticed when she glanced my way.

Maybe she was one of those gals who won't speak to strangers, but you never find out if you don't try. So when the bartender asked what I wanted to drink I said, "I don't know. Something different—it's a little early for . . ." I glanced at the redhead. "Miss?"

She turned slowly. Not just her

head. All of her, swinging tantalizingly toward me as the bar stool swiveled. Maybe she didn't talk to strangers, but she sure communicated.

I said, "May I ask you what that is you're drinking?"

"Sure," she said. "Ask me."

Whatever it was, I decided it must not be her first one. But I grinned and said, "O.K., what is that you're drinking?"

"It's a Martini."

"A—*a green Martini?*"

"Well, it's like a Martini, only it's green. Creme de menthe instead of vermouth."

"Is it any good?"

"'Licious."

Well, maybe it would be worth it. I said to the bartender, "Just what I wanted."

He looked at me as if I'd ordered a Horse's Neck. "You're kidding."

I smiled. "I'll let you know when I'm kidding."

He made the appalling concoction.

Surprisingly, it wasn't half bad. In fact, when I started the second it was 'licious. Perhaps because I'd timed the first one so that I finished it just as the redhead pushed her empty glass across the bar. When I suggested that, since she had introduced me to whatever it was, perhaps it would be clever of me to buy us both another, she said, "Clev-er," which I took to mean agreement.

We finished the second drinks

without an empty stool between us, but she hadn't told me anything important. Not even her name, or if she was staying at the Seawinds.

Finally I said, as we began our third green Martini, "Why don't we do something exciting tonight? I mean, like go out for dinner, or even stay in for din—"

"Can't." She lifted her left wrist and looked at a glittery watch with a face the size of a sliced pea and apparently invisible numbers on it. She said, "I've got to meet Al—" She chopped it off quick. "Oo." Her eyes widened, then narrowed slyly. "Il."

"He's sick?"

"Il—Bill, I mean."

"Dear, I refuse to believe you're waiting for a guy named Al Ooilil-Bill. Unless he's a prince from—"

"Bill, that's his name."

"Who were those other guys?"

"They're nobody. Umm, I just said Il because—well, if you want the truth I don't know why. I say funny things when I drink Martinis."

"Don't we all?" I grinned at her. No matter what she was saying, she made it sound kind of pretty, like melodic rock and roll.

"What time is it?" she asked me.

I looked at the clock behind the bar. "Five."

"Oh, dear. In only another hour I have to meet—" She stopped, looking puzzled.

"Bill?"

"Yes," she smiled her thanks at

me. "Bill, I'd better go. "It'll take me that long just to soak and powder."

"To what?"

"Soak and pow—why am I telling you?"

"Beats me. But, well, I'm interested."

It seemed to make her glad.

"I soak," she said. "In a warm tub. Before I get dressed to go out, I always soak and soak. And then powder all over. I think it's nice if women powder all over, don't you?"

"If you say so."

"I think if you know you smell good, you feel good, don't you?"

"If you say."

"And the powder I use smells so—I don't know. You tell me."

"Hmm?"

"I can't describe it. You tell me."

She was wearing a pale-gray dress with a square-cut neckline and inch-wide straps over her shoulders. She slid the strap off her right shoulder, and kind of nudged the shoulder—actually the whole general area—at me.

She smiled. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to say anything. Messages passed between us in a kind of Morse plasma. Well, I thought, nothing beats determination. I'd set out to get a smell of her, and here I was: smelling. I got both nostrils going down there, and in no more than five seconds, or ten, or so, I was sure: *Caress!* As if I hadn't already figured it out.

"Doesn't it smell good?" she said finally. "What does it smell like to you?"

"Who cares?"

"Tell me."

"Well, like strangled flowers, the carnivorous kind that eat little men."

"I've got to go."

"You're kidding."

"I really do."

"But I've barely started—"

"I almost wish I *didn't* have to go," she said brightly. "Were you serious about doing something later?"

"You bet I was serious."

"Well, like I said I have to meet—" She stopped, her green eyes getting a slightly glazed look again.

"Bill?"

"Yes. If it wasn't for him we could do something." She paused, then put the strap back up over her shoulder.

"Actually," she went on, "he can only see me for an hour or two tonight. Just long enough for maybe a drink and some talk. So if you're still around, like maybe seven or eight o'clock, we could do something."

"I'll be around. Bill can't stay, huh?"

"No. He's got something important to do."

"He must be nuts," I said. "Important like what?"

But that she wouldn't tell me. Maybe she didn't know.

"Well, I've got to go soak," she said. "And powder." She smiled meaningfully, and left.

I sat there, smiling meaningfully. And slowly came back to normal. There's something about green Martinis. There really is. By the time I'd finished that third one I knew all I needed to know. I knew, of course, that she was Ardith Mellow, and powdered "all over" with *Caress!*, and that Al Ooilbill was William Simms, born Alston Spaniel, and that he had something important—damned important, if he preferred it to being with Ardith—to do tonight, an so forth.

But those weren't the most important things. The important thing was that I knew, now, what I was going to do about it.

It struck me as a little goofy, even after three green Martinis. But I probably wouldn't have thought of it at all if it hadn't been for Madison's goofy conditions. And if I hadn't met Ardith.

It was a quarter to six. Not much time. In fifteen minutes, or less, Alston was supposed to show up, apparently. But I thought there was time—at least, if Ardith was still soaking, and soaking, in her tub.

VII

SHE WAS. I couldn't see her, but the door was cracked and I could hear her in there, humming

and splashing in the tub. I breathed heavily, listening to her. But it's not what you think. Not entirely. I'd run all the way to my Cad, spent a minute digging through the junk in my trunk, found what I was after, and had then run back to the Seawinds.

Ardith's door had been locked this time, and I'd spent another two minutes picking a lock—not hers, but Alston's next door, to avoid alarming her. Then through the adjoining door and into Ardith's bedroom. Right next to the tiled bathroom, in which she still hummed and splashed. If only she'd stop humming and *splashing*, I thought.

Besides, she'd have to shake a leg if she intended to be all dried and powdered, much less dressed in something zippy before Spaniel got here. So would I have to shake a leg. It was now five minutes to six.

But it didn't take me long to get the job done.

I'd brought up an empty paper sack, and another sack filled with the powder I'd rummaged for in the trunk of my Cadillac. The big box of *Caress!* was still where I'd seen it before, and I opened the box, poured about half the *Caress!* into my empty sack, and replaced it with an equal amount of the powder I'd grabbed from my Cad.

The consistency was O.K., but the replacement was a bit lighter than Ardith's. Probably she would-

n't notice. It still smelled like those wild strangled flowers.

I put the top back on the box, and it was done. For a moment I hesitated, wondering. Wondering if I was wrong about why Spaniel was coming here, wrong about Ardith, wrong about everything. Maybe it was those green Martinis.

But right then Ardith stopped humming and splashing. There was the swirl of water, the sexy little drip-drip as water apparently dripped from, well, from Ardith.

And on the wooden walk outside, fronting all four suites, the thump of big feet.

Thump-thump.

Ye Gods, I thought. Ardith, there like that. And me here like this. And Spaniel about to spring through the door.

Thump.

The sound of footsteps was on my left as I faced the sea, coming closer. The draperies in here were drawn now, and I couldn't see out. Suite A was clear down at the left, then B, Alston's own through which I'd come a minute or two ago, then this one and finally D, the last of the four.

Thump-thump-thump.

The footsteps clumped up to Alston's suite, kept coming. I jumped for the interconnecting door, went through it and swung it almost closed behind me. Barely in time.

Barely in time—even though the heavy footsteps went right on by and I heard the door of Suite D

open and close—because only seconds after I got safely into Spaniel's suite, Ardith Mellow came out of the bathroom. Ardith and a towel.

She wasn't exactly wearing it, but more sort of nuzzling and patting herself with it, rubbing and blotting the last traces of moisture



from her body. From, let's be accurate, her nude and voluptuously sensational body.

I left the door cracked, even opened it another inch. Yes, I peeked. But, truly, it was not merely for the purpose of peeking. I had to know—yes, she was doing it.

She opened the box of *Caress!*, picked up the great big fluffy purple puff, dabbed it at the powder and then dabbed and stroked and patted and *Caressed!* her smooth throat, high heavy breasts, and columnar thighs, then filled the puff with powder once more, and stroked and dabbed, and filled the powderpuff again. . . .

Thump-thump-thump!

Right up to Spaniel's door. This door, the one ten feet from me. I couldn't go back into Ardith's room. That would blow the whole bit if it wasn't ruined already. I had eased the connecting door closed at the first *thump*, and now, almost without thinking, I dived for Spaniel's bed and slid under it. As the door opened and he came inside.

I could still hear thumping, but it was my heartbeat. Spaniel walked across the floor, turned, walked back and turned again.

I didn't get it. He was pacing as though waiting for something. Maybe he was waiting for Ardith to finish powdering, or to get dressed in something zippy, or maybe to come in and join him.

But that wasn't it. The phone rang.

Two swift steps and Spaniel was there.

"Yeah?" he said.

Silence for a few seconds. Then, "Good. Tonight, huh? O.K. I'll see you tomorrow. . . . Yeah, you damn well bet I'll see you tomorrow." A brief pause, then he said, "Two G's. Right . . . right." He hung up.

Two G's. It reminded me of the man in the Spartan, dying, right after telling me Spaniel has paid him "a G," a thousand bucks, as the down payment on his job—The job he'd been unable to finish. Well, at least that Viper wouldn't be getting the two G's Spaniel had

mentioned. Al seemed to be throwing plenty of money around.

He was moving across the room again, straight to the connecting door. He didn't even knock, just went on in. It occurred to me he must have come in here merely to wait for the call, hadn't even taken time for a shower. But, probably, I thought, he had already taken a shower.

The door clicked shut behind him.

"Bill, darling!" Ardith cried.

"Who the hell is Bill?" he said.

"Oo—I mean, Il—Al!"

Well, you may be able to imagine the dialogue which ensued, but it soon stopped ensuing. She covered her confusion one way or another, and they stopped talking. I waited a minute, then rolled from under the bed and stood up, moved slowly to the door. Not the outside door; the door between Suites B and C.

I used a full sixty seconds turning the knob, cracking the door again, careful to move very slowly and to make as little sound as possible. Probably four or five seconds would have been careful enough.

I hadn't been wrong about Spaniel. Or Ardith. Pretty zippy. It gave me a little hope. Maybe, just maybe, I wasn't wrong about the rest of it.

I eased the door shut again, and left. Silently, even though I doubted they'd have heard me if I'd thumped out the way Alston had

come in. I went to the bar down below. And had, as a kind of ceremony, a green Martini.

And waited for Ardith.

VIII

THIS TIME the sorrowful-faced butler didn't let me in. It was G. Raney Madison himself who opened the door.

I stepped inside, carrying the heavy lamp in one hand. We went into his den, where the two brackets still stood out nakedly against the bare wall, and sat in two of the big chairs. Madison lit one of his little cigars and said, "Well, Mr. Scott, I did what you asked."

"It's all set?"

He nodded.

Soon we would know, I thought. Unless I was nuts which I was now beginning to think barely possible.

This was Friday night. Two nights ago I'd sat here and listened to Mr. Madison's tale. Last night I had waited for Ardith until shortly after seven, when she joined me and had another gin-and-creme de menth. I wisely switched to bourbon, and we talked for an hour.

I learned nothing except that she still smelled good, and that what's-his-name wouldn't be back until the early morning, at least, and that he didn't have another girl. Ardith was his "one true love." No, she didn't know any Mrs. Ingrid Otterman.

But, sadly, I had to leave. I told

her my nose was stopped up. After another drink I drove back to Hollywood, to the Spartan Apartment Hotel, and went to bed. I slept long enough to make up for the snoozing I'd missed, then in the afternoon phoned G. Raney Madison and said I'd see him at seven.

"I don't understand what you plan to do, Mr. Scott," he said.

"Well, that's because I left the gimmick out. I just wanted to be sure you'd be able to have everybody here tonight."

"They are all in the library."

"Good. Here's the pitch. I'm satisfied that a man named Alston Spaniel stole your Da Vinci. I think he's already delivered it to the buyer, but who that is I don't know yet. However I managed, without his knowledge, to get onto Spaniel's hands a powder which glows under infra-red light. Anything he handled in the last twenty-four hours will have traces of that powder on it. Even if he washed his hands, or showered. It's remarkably persistent stuff."

I pointed to the lamp which I'd placed on the carpet at my feet. "That's an infra-red lamp, Mr. Madison. If Spaniel handled the Da Vinci and then somebody else handled it, or if he shook hands with the buyer, that person will also have traces of the powder, which will be revealed by this lamp. That's what I want to check out tonight."

He was silent for several seconds. Then he said, "I see. I like it. But how did you manage to get this powder on the gentleman's hands, as you say, without his knowledge?"

I smiled, thinking of Ardith, and her *Caress!* But I merely said, "Well, it's a bit complicated, Mr. Madison. There's not time to go into it now. I guarantee he doesn't know I did it, though. Shall we go in and check the people in the library?"

"By all means." He paused. "What should we expect to see? I understand the principle involved: you'll merely direct the beam of your lamp on the hands of those you wish to check, right?"

"That's right."

"What will the effect be? The powder will glow under the lamp?"

"Believe me, if we find somebody with traces of the powder on his hands, you won't be able to miss it. The effect is quite striking."

He nodded, and stood up.

When we entered the library, five people were there waiting for us. Mrs. Madison, George Raney Madison, Jr., the butler, Jim Chance, and just to be on the safe side, Mr. Ladd, the guy who had installed the alarm system.

This was the first time I'd seen James Chance. He was a tall, heavy-boned man, solid, with a slightly sour face, but not at all bad looking. He had bushy brows over

brown eyes, and crew-cut dark hair with streaks of gray in it. He glanced at me curiously. So did the others.

Madison had already told them I was conducting an "experiment," and they were to cooperate with me, so I stationed the butler by the light switch and lined the four others up on the long burnt-orange divan.

Standing near the door with the butler, I said, "Just for a check, douse the lights, Sterling."

He doused them. I flicked the lamp's switch and aimed its beam at Sterling, let the radiation pour onto his hands. Nothing. Just the shadowy substance of hands and fingers. No glowing in the darkness. In a way, I was disappointed. It would have been a great line. But the butler was clean. No question about it.

So I said, "O.K., lights on again." He flipped the switch. I continued, "I'll give you a nod when I'm at the divan. Turn off the lights, then switch them on when I call to you. Got it?"

"Of course, sir."

I walked across the room toward the four people, who were eyeing me in some puzzlement. What I felt wasn't puzzlement but a growing excitement. It was exciting. This was the moment of truth, the culmination of my Herculean labors. It's always exciting at the moment just before the climax when the clever investigator,

in one master stroke, unmasks the culprit. Then, of course, he says something like, "Elementary!" or "It was nothing, really," so people won't think he's got a fat head. Yes, I was excited, all right.

Mrs. Madison was on my left, George next to her, and on my right Mr. Ladd and Jim Chance. In seconds now it would all be over. I turned and nodded cleverly to Sterling. He doused the lights.

I flipped the switch on my infrared lamp and poured it on Mrs. Madison. Then George. Then Mr. Ladd. Then Mr. Chance. Then I did it again, throwing the beam all over the place. Just dark light in darkness.

Nothing.

I wondered if maybe the lamp wasn't working, stepped back and directed the beam onto my own left hand. Yeah, the infra-red beam was on all right; my hand glowed like crazy. When I'd transferred the powder to Ardith's box I'd naturally got a lot of it on my own hands, and as I'd told Mr. Madison the powder was remarkably sticky stuff.

I was staring at my fingers, eerily glowing, when there was a great shout: "Lights! Turn on the lights!" Then somebody grabbed me. A body thumped into me and hands clutched at my wrists.

Startled, I dropped the lamp as the room lights went on.

The guy trying to wrestle me around was G. Raney Madison.

He had his hands on my wrists and was looking straight at me, yelling excitedly.

"I've got him, Scott!" he yelled. "I've got—"

He stopped.

"You!" He gasped.

"Of course it's me," I said irritably.

"But—you?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous."

What happened to my master stroke? I was thinking. Even with the lights on, the infrared beam would show traces of the powder if held close enough, so without making any attempt to hide what I was doing I examined the hands of the four people on the divan. Nothing. No doubt about it.

I said, "Well, I'll—I'll talk to you later."

Madison went with me into the hallway outside the library.

"What happened?" he said.

"I goofed."

"Does that mean—"

"Let me check your hands, Mr. Madison. Just to cover all the possibilities."

He frowned, but then said, "Of course," and held his hands out. Nothing.

I was uncovering a lot of nothing.

"Then the experiment is a failure, Mr. Scott?"

"Well, I suppose—" I thought about it. I thought a little more about it, and smiled. "No, Mr. Madison. Not exactly."

IX

I MADE exceptionally good time. By eight-fifteen I was knocking at the door of Suite C at the Seawinds in Laguna Beach. I had my portable lamp in one hand, and portable .38 Colt Special in the other, just in case Alston Spaniel answered the door.

I didn't think he would. He didn't.

It was Ardith Mellow. Sweet-smelling Ardith, who, unless I really had goofed, glowed in the dark.

"Hi," I said cheerfully.

"Oh, hello! It's Mr.—" She got that puzzled look.

"Bill."

"Of course. Come on in, Bill."

I went inside, shut the door, marched to her bedroom and found the box of *Caress!* When I shined my light on it the powder glowed as if alive and radioactive.

Ardith, looking over my shoulder, said, "Well, I never. Is that why it smells so good?"

"Nope." I turned the lamp's beam on Ardith. She was wearing a simple black cocktail dress with spaghetti straps and a provocatively nude neckline, and there was a lot of smooth white skin in view. All of it glowed beautifully. The stuff was even in her eyebrows, in her hair, on arms, fingers, elbows, everywhere. Literally everywhere, as I recalled.

"Ardith," I said, "last night at the bar before I left, you may re-

call I talked to you about a woman named Mrs. Ingrid Otterman."

"I remember. Why does it shine so funny, like—"

"I also hinted that maybe your fellow—hell, let's call him Alston Spaniel, shall we?"

"I don't know any Alston Spaniel. He—my fellow—told me never, *never* to say anything to anybody who asked *anything*—"

"Yeah. It's still Alston Spaniel. I tried to tell you this last night. I've a hunch he's got another tomato—girl around here. A hot-looking—"

"He doesn't!"

"I know. You're his one true love. But what if he's got *lots* of one true loves?"

"That's silly."

"What if I could prove it? Would you feel more like telling me a little about Alston then?"

She didn't even deny his name was Alston. She squinted her eyes and said, "Prove?"

I pointed at the box and told her what was in it, what I'd done, explained about the lamp in my hand and why she was glowing.

"You mean you put something in my *Caress!* box?" she asked me, still struggling with the problem.

"You got it," I said. "So then you put it on you, yourself. Dear, it's all over you, wherever you powdered with that great big fluffy purple puff."

Her green eyes narrowed. Widened. Squinted. Waggled. She



looked at me and said in a stony voice, "How did you know it was a great big fluffy purple puff?"

She had me there. "That's a trade secret."

It seemed to start sinking in, then, and Ardith said, "All over me? *All* over?"

"All."

She grabbed the lamp from my

hand, bent over and pulled up her skirt and shined the light on her legs. Wow. Yeah, she'd gotten the legs good. Then Ardith straightened up, raised the lamp and aimed it toward the nude top of her dress. With her free hand she reached for one of her singular breasts. Damned if she didn't haul it out and examine its apparently

radioactive gorgeousness in the infrared beam.

She stared at it, examined it closely. Which made two of us. She made a little noise, and I made a kind of muffled meowing sound.

"But *why*?" she asked in perplexity.

"Well, it's rather complicated —"

"Will it hurt me? Is it like X-rays?"

"Goodness no, and it won't hurt a bit, dear."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive. It isn't hurting, is it?"

"No. No, I have to admit that." She realized she was still holding onto her breast and put it back where it had come from.

"No, it doesn't hurt," she said seriously.

"But *why*?" she said again. "Why did you put it in my *Caress* box?"

"Why? Well—" I paused and collected my thoughts, then went on briskly, "You've told me several things, Ardith. That you never heard of black-haired Mrs. Otterman and you're sure Alston—Bill—whichever he is—never heard of her, either. You're his one true love, and all that."

"I *am* his one true love."

"I already asked you, what if I could *prove* different?"

"You couldn't."

"I could. And will. Let me clue you, dear. The powder which you

administered to your, um, anatomy with that great big fluffy purple puff is obviously all over you. If Alston got some of that powder on his, ah, hands—and then put his, ah, hands on—um—a portion of *another* woman's anatomy, then according to the laws of magnetism, cohesion, friction—according to the laws of science, the evidence should still reside not only upon Alston's hands but upon that aforementioned portion of her anatomy." It was a bit difficult to explain delicately.

But she got it right away.

"Why, that bastard!" she said.

"So let's go see the gal in question. Unless you want to spill to me about Alston immediately."

"I don't believe you. Besides, I am his one true love."

"Yeah. Well, we'll see."

After my thunderous knock on Mrs. Otterman's door in the Laguna Hotel, there were sudden sounds inside. Rustling, thumping then footsteps coming toward us. The door opened and the shapely black-haired gal looked out, dark brows knit in a frown.

I pushed the door open and she said, "What's the meaning of this?"

Her face was angry. By that time I'd poured the infra-red light over her and the evidence was unmistakable. Luminous streaks on her face and throat, her bare shoulders and the upper swell of her breasts.

With the door wide, both Ardith and I could see she wasn't dressed to go out. She had a striped beach towel wrapped around her, beneath her arms and reaching down nearly to her knees, and quite clearly she wore nothing beneath it.

Ardith swept past me and the black-haired tomato moved away from her. I stepped inside and slammed the door, then looked around and peeked into the john, but the room appeared empty except for the three of us.

Mrs. Otterman obviously didn't know what was going on, and a little fright was beginning to show on her sensual face.

I stepped close to her, letting the light pour onto her face and shoulders, and glanced at Ardith. "Maybe Spaniel isn't here now, but he sure as hell *was* here. Satisfied?"

She didn't speak to me. She glared at Mrs. Otterman and said, "You bitch! Where's Al?"

Al. She'd got it right that time.

"Al?" said Mrs. Otterman. "Who?"

These babes, they sure weren't going to admit they knew Al. He trained his one-true-loves well. They weren't going to talk about Al. Not much, they weren't.

"You know who!" Ardith screamed.

Then in one swift movement her hands reached out, grabbed the beach towel, and yanked. It



came free and Ardith threw it to the floor, pointed at Mrs. Otterman's marvelous, jutting breasts, pointed here and there and practically everywhere, and yelled: "That Al, that's who!"

Mrs. Otterman reacted automatically, I suppose.

The towel had barely hit the floor when she threw her right arm way back and out as if reaching for the brass ring on a merry-go-round, then swung it forward and *thwack!* She got Ardith on the cheek and knocked her halfway across the room.

But not down. Not down, and a long way from out.

"Eeee!" Ardith yelled, and charged at Mrs. Otterman. Sock, *thwack!* Slap!

"My Al!"

"Your Al? Why you—"

Thwack!

Friends, it was the battle of the decade. Maybe even the heavyweight championship of the century. It was glorious. Midway in the first round Mrs. Otterman got one hand in Ardith's red hair and another wound in her black dress and tried to yank them both off. She got the dress three-fourths off, but couldn't manage the hair, and by that time Ardith had kicked her in the stomach and knocked her flat on her back, going "Ooooph!" and then gasping.

It was a combination of boxing, slapping, screaming, and wrestling. I saw a few blows and holds that not even I—with years of unarmed defense, judo, aikido, karate, and unnamed systems behind me—had witnessed or even experimented with before.

Ardith lost the rest of her dress and finally was fighting to the death in a pair of black-lace pants, which made it easy to tell her from Mrs. Otterman, who was wearing nothing except lots of *Caress!*

The fight ended when Ardith hit Mrs. Otterman with a ceramic lamp, then fell, exhausted, to her hands and knees. Mrs. Otterman lay flat on her back, eyes slowly opening and closing, and saying, "Gug—ahp—"

And then something sneezed, under the bed.

I smiled.

"Come on out, Al," I said.

He came out, but not like a man

defeated. He came out in a hurry, his handsome face contorted with rage, frustration, perhaps a sense of irrevocable loss. He came out, onto his knees, up in a hurry, and at me, swinging his right hand.

Even while swinging he got a glimpse of his two true loves in approximately equal states of nudity and sheer exhaustion on the floor, and he let out the cry of a wounded elk, then concentrated on knocking my block off.

But he didn't concentrate hard enough. And he shouldn't have swung that right hand at me in the first place. In fact, he shouldn't have swung any hand at me.

It was a two-punch fight. His, which whistled by my ear as I bent my knees and pulled my head aside two or three inches, and mine, which cracked on his chin with the sound of a baseball bat breaking.

Then Alston was sprawled next to the wall, silent; Mrs. Otterman was gasping her last "Gug . . ." and trying to struggle to a sitting position; and Ardith was still on her hands and knees, breathing like a distance runner.

I didn't say anything for a while. I looked at Alston, at Mrs. Otterman, at Ardith. I took a good look, since perhaps never again would such a sight present itself to my eyes, and I wanted to remember every little detail in case I should some day write my autobiography. Probably I should start

out describing this scene, I thought, to make sure it would be a best-seller.

Finally, having memorized all of Chapter One, clear up to the flashback, I said, "Well, girls, shall we now discuss this whole affair sensibly? Come, let us reason together . . ."

X

I CAUGHT UP with Lupo—this time in Dolly's, not at The Happy Time. Back where it really had started. From Dolly's to The Happy Time, to Dolly's again. But this was the *really* unhappy time for Lupo.

On the first occasion he'd merely been scared; and of course, now, I knew precisely why. At our second meeting he'd been horrified, afraid I was truly going to shoot him in the eye. But this time the jig was up, and he knew it.

He was already in a booth. Two men sat opposite him. His back was to me, but apparently one of the other guys saw me striding purposefully toward them and told Lupo that a large, white-haired, fierce-looking individual was descending determinedly upon them.

Lupo craned his head around the side of the booth and spotted me. He just looked. He didn't spring to his feet, or try to run, or do anything violent. Just looked. The Colt Special wasn't in its holster; it was in my right-hand

coat pocket and my hand was around it, but as it turned out I didn't need it.

When I stopped by the booth, Lupo looked up at me and said, very quietly, "Well?"

"All of it, Lupo," I said. "The Da Vinci bit, the m.o., who and why, even the phoney lead to Spaniel. Hell, I even know who gave you the idea about Alston. I gave you the idea. Right?"

He raised one hand weakly and waved it at the two men, as though waving good-by. Well, it was true; he was waving good-by. They left.

I slid into the seat they'd vacated and said, "I'll tell you about it, Lupo. I'll even buy you a drink."

"Thanks a bunch," he said. "I can use a drink."

After the highballs arrived, I said, "I'll skip the details. Just let it be said that Alston Spaniel, true to form, had two women with him at Laguna, stashed in separate pads. And both of them told me everything they could think of about Al, which was plenty.

"I can account for virtually every minute of his time for the last forty-eight hours and more. For example, last night he was with one of them till about seven, then went directly to the other one—what a life that man leads."

"Yeah," said Lupo gloomily.

"For a better example, I know that on Wednesday night, when I first asked you to listen around for

rumbles about an art heist in Bel Air, Alston was with one of his lovelies from about five on. At the Hollywood Roosevelt by the way, not the Westmoreland, as you told me.

"Around ten-thirty Al got a phone call from somebody, where-upon he and the lovely packed a couple bags and headed for Laguna Beach. He was with her constantly, and did not make any phone calls or go out into the city. In other words, Lupo, he did not and could not have contacted a killer or set up a hit. *He* didn't send that gunman to blast me."

Lupo moistened his lips but didn't speak.

"Interestingly enough, the killer didn't even say Al Spaniel sent him to plug me. What he said when I asked him who sent him was, 'Spaniel. He told me his name was Al Spaniel.' Get that, Lupo. He *told* me, the bum said. Which of course means he didn't know Al by sight, but merely accepted the word of the guy who hired him." I grinned. "Obviously he didn't know you by sight, either, Lupo."

He lifted his glass and I saw his Adam's apple bounce as he took three or four successive swallows. When he put the glass down, there was less than an inch of liquid left in it.

"I heard Alston talking to somebody on the phone last night about a two-thousand-buck payment, but

I thought *he* was making the payment. Hell, he was *getting* the two G's, wasn't he, Lupo? Two G's—from you, of course—for taking a quick expense paid trip to Laguna. For leading me on a wild-geese chase. To get me out of L.A. while you disposed of the Da Vinci. Was that the whole payment, or were you going to give him enough to settle with Joe Pappa when you got your cut from the Da Vinci?"

He finished his drink, that was all.

I leaned forward. "You're going to tell me, you know."

He swallowed. "Yeah, I know. Go on. Or is that it?"

"Not by a long shot. Spaniel didn't heist the Da Vinci, so who did? Spaniel didn't send that hood gunning for me, so who did?"

"Maybe—maybe he did send the hood, Scott," Lupo said hesitantly. "Just because he didn't know by sight the person who hired—"

"Quit trying. There's plenty more. For one thing, Spaniel didn't get that phone call when he was with Ardith Mellow until a little after ten-thirty."

"Ardith Mellow? You're kidding. Nobody can be named—"

"That's her name. You must have seen Alston with her at one time or another, so you could describe her—and very well, by the way. A superbly fat redhead with green eyes, to change your de-



scription a little. But the first time I talked to you, you didn't get in touch with Spaniel. You just gave me a song and dance and got in touch with that hood instead. After I charged in on you the second time—still alive, and full of fun—*then* you called him. The important point is Spaniel didn't get that call from you until *after* the hood had tried for me at the Spartan and missed. That hood was dead and all through bleeding by ten o'clock."

He rolled it around in his head, nodded slightly, looking depressed.

"Lupo, I told you I suspected three men of the heist, one of whom was Alston Spaniel. You yourself told me the only one of the three you contacted was Spaniel. So the guy who sent that hood to stop me—to stop me from getting to the guy who really stole that quarter-of-a-million-buck Da Vinci—was one of four men who knew I was on the prowl for it. The one with the most to lose. Spaniel himself, you, a guy named

Zeke, to whom I told the same story I gave you, and my client.

"I arbitrarily eliminate Zeke for many good reasons. Good enough for me, anyway. It wouldn't have been my client, says the simplest logic. From talking to Spaniel's two tomatoes—and Spaniel himself, for that matter—I know it wasn't Spaniel. That leaves you, Lupo."

"I wish you were dead," he said almost brightly.

"Yeah, I know."

"You want to buy me another drink, Scott?"

"Sure. I'll buy you champagne if you want it. This is a night for celebration."

He smiled sadly. "I don't believe I can look upon this as a celebration."

I ordered one more drink, for him. Mine was three-fourths full. But that's usually the way it is, you can almost look at the glasses and tell who's been doing all the talking. Lupo's turn was coming, though.

"Hell," I said. "I should have realized Spaniel wouldn't have been cavorting with two babes, not if he was preparing to get rid of a hot Da Vinci. Not even Alston Spaniel. And if he wasn't selling the Da Vinci, who was? There's one more little item, then it's your turn, Lupo."

"What's the item?"

"The first time I saw you Wednesday night, here in Dolly's,

you were at the bar, talking to a flabby, heavy-set man. He disappeared, almost immediately. The second time I saw you, in *The Happy Time*, a guy—who, I noted even then, looked much like the character I'd earlier seen with you in *Dolly's*—was jawing with you. And he took off like a scared rabbit, just like the first time. I'll give you eight to five he was your customer, the guy you were dickering with about the price of the *Da Vinci*. How much did you get, by the way?"

Lupo was looking at his drink. Finally he raised his eyes and stared at me silently for maybe ten long seconds. Then he said, "A hundred thousand. He had it with him the second time you spotted us together. My cut was forty G's."

"Who took it off your hands for the hundred big ones?"

"Finster."

At first the name didn't register. Then I remembered where I'd heard it. Sure, I thought, it made sense. "O.K., Lupo," I said. "The rest of it."

This time, while he talked, I did the drinking.

XI

IT WAS only a few minutes after eleven p.m. when G. Raney Madison, once more, opened the door of his *Bel Air* home and looked at me. Looked wearily.

Probably the hours since I'd left here hadn't been especially pleasant for him.

But then he turned his gaze toward the man with me and said, "Who is this gentleman, Mr. Scott?"

"He's the guy who heisted your *Da Vinci*."

Madison suddenly stopped looking weary.

Inside, we left Lupo standing before the big carved-wood library doors, then stepped into the library. The whole gang was still gathered here, all looking uncomfortable. One of them, of course, exceedingly uncomfortable, even if the totality of discomfort failed to show clearly.

I walked toward the group sitting on the divan or standing near it, and stopped.

"Okay," I yelled. "You can come on in."

Then I turned and said pleasantly, "I want you to meet a friend of yours, George."

Uh-huh. George. Even if I hadn't already been sure it was young G. Raney Madison, Jr., I would have known from his reaction when he lamped Lupo. Already pale as milk, he clabbered. He got about the color of a winter turnip; his jaw sagged; breath sighed from his open mouth.

I merely noted all that, then turned to look at my client.

G. Raney Madison looked worse than Junior. I'd told him to

be ready for anything, even for the worst. I think probably he already knew, or at least feared he knew. None of that helped, though; he looked like a man beginning to die. And maybe he was, at that. Requite thee with death, I thought.

There was thick silence, which thickened some more.

It was broken only when George Raney Madison, Jr., said something.

It was just one word. It was not a lovely word. . . .

Theodore Finster, whom Madison himself had told me was one of the final three bidders on the Da Vince, also lived, conveniently, in Bel Air. The trip to his home, and picking up the Da Vinci, was anticlimactic. It took less than thirty minutes for me to drive there, do the job, throw the fear of ghastly retribution into him, and drive back to Madison's for the last time.

With the DaVinci once more on the wall of his den, Madison turned from his examination of it, looking tired and old.

I said, "At this point it's really none of my business, Mr. Madison. So just tell me to blow if you want to. But did you really believe it was Jim Chance?"

He hesitated before answering. Then he said, haltingly, "I think so. I know I wanted to believe it, painful as the thought was. The other was simply too—" He didn't finish.

We were quite for a while. I was thinking of George, who had liked the idea of selling his dad's art object and upping his weekly allowance by approximately \$59,900 for the week; and of Theodore Finster, unsuccessful bidder, who had liked the idea of buying a \$280,000 Da Vinci for \$100,000. And of Lupo, who was in it for \$40,000. I couldn't know what Mr. Madison was thinking, not for sure, but I had a pretty good idea.

Finally he said, "Did my—my son approach Mr. Finster?"

"No. It was his idea, but the guy he approached was Lupo."

"How did George happen to know such an individual?"

"He met him at Doll—well, at a bar. What he was doing there isn't important now, but it's important that he did meet Lupo, and knew quite a bit about him—as, for example that he was an ex-art thief. At least, I thought he was ex. Maybe when George told him the setup, it looked like too soft a touch to pass up. George did know, of course, who the other unsuccessful bidders were and passed the info on to Lupo. Lupo took it from there. In fact, he was still dickering with Finster when I walked in on them the first two times."

"He really tried to have you killed?"

"Yeah. He knew, even if I didn't then, that I'd seen him *with* Finster, *with* the guy who was go-

ing to buy the Da Vinci, which naturally linked them together like handcuffs. Incidentally, George had phoned Lupo shortly before I found him, and told him I'd just been talking to you, and must be on the case, so when I walked in on Lupo he knew what I was after. He might even have thought I was already on to him. If I pinned the job on him, he'd go back to the slammer, not to mention the fact that he'd lose his forty-thousand clams. Guys have been killed for forty cents.

"Anyway, it gave him enough of a scare so he sent a wiper to poop me." I paused. "Actually, if he hadn't, I might not have got on to him. But he reacted like a guilty man, which is the hell of being guilty."

"Poop?"

"To plug me, shoot, kill. To erase me from the area entirely."

"Yes. So this Mr. Spaniel you mentioned had nothing to do with the theft?"

"Nothing. Hell, he was too busy with other things," I finished, eyes rolling. "It was clever of Lupo to send me on a wild-goose chase, sure, but all he really did was listen to me tell my suspicions, what I thought, then feed it back to me. No wonder I believed it. It was my own idea. Lupo figured, correctly, that with all my attention focused on Spaniel I wouldn't even think of checking on anybody else, including Lupo himself."

"Mr. Scott," Madison said soberly, "when I first spoke to you on the phone I said I knew of your reputation for getting things done, even though sometimes by unusual methods."

Boy, I thought, you don't know how unusual.

He went on, "And you have, indeed, done precisely what I asked of you. I wish it could have ended differently, but I am none the less very grateful."

He reached into his pocket, took out a piece of paper, and handed it to me.

It was the check. The very lovely check.

"Your part in this affair is concluded, Mr. Scott. you may be sure I shall take that action which is appropriate. The thief will be prosecuted, Mr. Finster will pay his debt one way or another, and as for what happens to my son—" He sighed.

"Yes, sir."

We shook hands. "I wish to hell," I said, "it *had* been the butler."

He smiled a little. "Thank you, Mr. Scott."

"Thank you, Mr. Madison. And good night."

I left him standing in the den, the Da Vinci on the wall behind him. He wasn't looking at it. He was looking across the room, as if at something very distant, distant in space and time. I suppose he was.

XII

IT WAS ONLY half an hour after midnight, a time when life is still pretty zippy, here and there. Hell, even the bars were still

Alston Spaniel. And Ardith, and Mrs. Otterman. Every once in a while I imagined I could see bodies, glowing in the dark. . . .

Why not?

I called Antonia.

SHELL SCOTT LEADS NEXT MONTH'S HEADLINERS WITH—

DEAD GIVEAWAY

"She was part girl, part mermaid, and no part lady, the sultry little mantrap who had promised to show me some new rules to an old, old game called Murder—if I dared to play it her way!"

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

40,000,000 readers have thrilled to Shell Scott novels. Now, for the first time, and in one of his best cases, you may read him in his own magazine.

open. I'd had lots of sack time. Even if I went to bed I wouldn't be able to sleep.

Besides, there were too many thoughts twirling in my mind. Thoughts about George and Lupo and Finster and Madison, among others. Others, like that bastard

Her voice was sleepy.

"Wake up, wake up," I said. "Darling, this is Shell."

She woke up. "The hell with you!" she said.

"Antonia, you don't really mean that." She started to tell me she did, too, mean it, but I kept on

going. "Darling, I really *was* on a case. And I've just wrapped it up, all over, I'm free."

"The hell—"

"I can't tell you what the job was, but it was for G. Raney Madison. Do you know who he is?"

"The billionaire?"

"Well, not actually a billionaire. But rich as hell. I recovered something for him, and he gave me, as my fee, a check for ten percent of the item's value to him. It's burning a hole in my pants—there's that word again. I don't know why it is whenever I talk to you—"

"Ten percent of what?" she asked.

"Of two hundred and eighty thousand bucks."

"Two hundred and eighty—Shell, darling!"

"Antonia!"

"Shell! Really?"

"Really!"

"And it's burning a hole in your pants?"

"Well, my pocket's starting to smoke a little. I'll hurry over before I catch fire entirely, hey?"

"Give me time to get dressed. I don't have anything on."

"Hot dog."

"I'll wear that outfit you like."

"You're wearing the outfit I like. I'm on my way!"

"Shell, *wait*. I mean it, give me

time to get dressed. We have to go out and spend money, lots of money, spend and spend—"

"Yeah," I said dully.

"Shell?"

"Yeah?"

"But afterwards—Well, don't worry, Shell, darling."

Actually, I wasn't *really* worried.

"O.K.," I said. "See you in a jiffy."

I hung up. I should never have told her the check was for twenty-eight thousand dollars. It might take *days* to spend twenty-eight thousand dollars. Ah, but surely, we wouldn't have to spend it all. I grabbed my coat, put it on, headed for the door.

The phone rang.

At this hour, it might be a potential client. Somebody in trouble. An interesting case, another fat fee maybe.

Well, maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. Duty, perseverance, dedication, all that jazz—it is very good jazz indeed. It's good, very good, drink for the parched spirit and meat for the hungry heart. But there is more to life than meat and drink, friends. There is the lean of life, and the fat of the land, all sorts of fun things.

As I went out the door, the phone was still ringing.

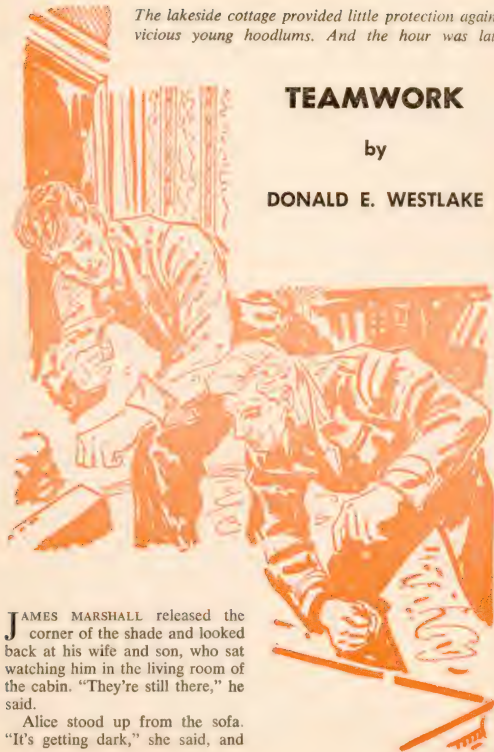
I let it ring.

The lakeside cottage provided little protection against vicious young hoodlums. And the hour was late.

TEAMWORK

by

DONALD E. WESTLAKE



JAMES MARSHALL released the corner of the shade and looked back at his wife and son, who sat watching him in the living room of the cabin. "They're still there," he said.

Alice stood up from the sofa. "It's getting dark," she said, and

James could hear the beginnings of hysteria in her voice. "They're waiting for it to get dark."

Bob, sixteen and as tall as his father, sat tense on the edge of his chair. "We need light," he said suddenly. He got to his feet and switched a lamp on.

"They're waiting for it to get dark," Alice repeated. She looked at James hopefully, as though pleading with him to say she was wrong.

He made no reply. But he knew she was right. The convertible was parked out there, just down the dirt road, beyond the driveway where his own car was parked. The three youths were sitting in the front seat, waiting. He could see the glow from their cigarettes. They'd lowered the car top and were waiting for night.

Marshall and his wife hadn't noticed the convertible right away. They'd left home before noon, and headed for the cabin on the lake, and James had first become aware that they were being trailed when they were ten or twelve miles from the city. It was an old car, painted a garish pink. James had pulled over to the right, expecting them to pass. Teen-age drivers always seemed to be in a hurry, especially when they were driving pink convertibles.

But the convertible hadn't attempted to pass them. It stayed right behind them, not too close, not too far back, and James was

pleasantly relieved. The road up to the lake wasn't a very good one. It was only two lanes wide, and full of hills and curves—a road made for accidents. He was glad the driver behind him wasn't one of those wild kids who make the headlines in the newspapers.

They had stopped in Walterville for lunch, taking their time, relaxing, easing off. It was vacation time, the two weeks in the year when the three of them could really slow down, and take it easy. It gave James an opportunity to get re-acquainted with his family. Especially with his son Bob, who was growing away from him.

For the last few years, ever since he had started high school, the boy had been growing secretive. He never brought his friends home any more, or discussed his affairs with his parents. Not that Bob was one of these juvenile delinquents—nothing like that. It was just that James no longer felt really close to the boy. There was no longer any feeling of teamwork between them.

Just about a mile beyond Walterville, after lunch, he could see in the car mirror that the pink convertible was behind them again. James was surprised at first, but it didn't worry him too much. The kids had stopped for lunch, and were now probably heading for the lake too. Go up Saturday, return Sunday. Bob had borrowed the family car for the same week-end purpose a few times.

The convertible had followed them all the way, and when James had parked in the driveway beside the cabin, it had gone speeding past them without slowing down. James had looked after it for a moment, seeing the two boys beside the driver looking back at him, and then had helped Alice and Bob carry the luggage into the cabin.

But then, an hour later, as James was putting a fresh bulb into the porch light, the convertible drove by again, slowly this time and the three boys looked directly at him as they passed. James paused, the lightbulb in his hand, staring after them, and the first touch of apprehension crossed his mind. He remembered headlines, telling of muggings, of people being beaten, robbed, sometimes even murdered in the city parks. That teacher who had been slashed with a knife last year—

He decided not to say anything about it, either to Alice or Bob. Finishing with the bulb replacement, he went back into the cabin, saying with false heartiness, "Where's the chow? I'm starved."

They ate dinner, and Alice talked about swimming and sunbaths and the trip to town on Monday for groceries. Bob talked about their rowboat, which leaked like a sieve and which he had promised faithfully to repair. The remembrance of the pink convertible kept James voluble and loud, telling his wife and son what a wonderful va-

cation they were going to have this year.

After dinner, he walked into the living room and looked out through the screen door at the dusk of evening. And he saw the pink convertible again, parked just down the road, the three boys still sitting in the front seat, smoking silently and watching the cabin.

James slammed and locked the door, and turned to face the others. Alice looked up, saw how white his face was, and said, "James! What's wrong?"

"The car that followed us," he said. "That pink convertible with the three boys in it. It's parked outside."

They did not seem to share his alarm. A car had come up to the lake, just behind them, with three boys in it. And now it was parked out front. What was so unusual about that? A coincidence, most likely—nothing more. There was probably no connection between those boys and the Marshall family. In a minute or two, they would go away.

But they hadn't gone away. And now full night had fallen, and he had just looked again, and they were still there. He had locked all of the windows, as well as the front and back doors. But it was a meaningless precaution and he knew it. The locks in the old cabin were worse than useless. On the back door it was just a latch—just a foot-long piece of stick. And any-

body could get through the windows. Break a pane, reach in, turn the catch, and open the window wide.

"Maybe they mean to rob us," said Alice. "Maybe they just want our money."

James looked at his wife, still slender, still lovely, thirty-eight but looking not a day over twenty-five. No, he thought, if they meant to steal, it wouldn't be just money. He glanced at his son again, sitting over in the corner by the fireplace. He was twisting his hands together, and staring at a heap of left-over ashes.

Normally, there would be a fire going in there by now. The chunks of log were in the box beside the fireplace, and the long matches from Japan, a gift to Alice from Bob last Mother's Day, were on the mantel.

But there was no fire. And it was getting chilly in the cabin. The nights by the lake were cold, even in August. James shivered, but it wasn't only the temperature. He looked at his son, feeling the boy withdraw from him, feeling more acutely than ever the loss of contact. He wished he and Bob really knew each other, in the way they had known each other years before. The boys outside, were Bob's contemporaries, and he would know them much better than James did. He would know what they wanted—what to do about them, how to appease them.

James cleared his throat. "Bob," he said.

The boy looked at him, expressionless.

"Bob," said James, "what do you think?"

The boy looked at him, studying him, assessing him, and James felt uncomfortable.

"I think," Bob told him, "that you're afraid."

"Of course he is," said Alice. "And so am I. And so should you be. We have every right to be afraid."

James turned away. He pulled back a corner of the shade again, peered through at the car. The moon was out now, but shapes were indistinct and fuzzy through the glass. But he couldn't see the glow from the burning cigarettes any more, and he thought he caught a glimpse of movement, near the front of his own car. He heard a hissing sound, and was puzzled for a minute. Then he realized what they were doing. He turned back to Alice and Bob again.

"They're coming," he said. "They're letting the air out of the tires of our car."

Bob got to his feet and started for the door. James grabbed his arm and held him back. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Outside. I'll talk to them, see what they want."

"Don't be silly. If we split up we're finished. They'll beat you up

out there, and then come in here after your mother and me."

Bob stared levelly at him. "You got any better ideas?"

"You can't go out there!" James felt helpless, vulnerable. "Listen," he said. "We can take care of them. Three punks. But we've got to stick together. Listen, teamwork—"

Bob laughed, without humor. "They'll have teamwork, too."

"A lot depends on what team you're on," James told him. "We're inside, they're outside. All we have to do is keep them from getting in."

"As easy as that."

"It shouldn't be hard. Three punks like that. We should be able to take them."

"They'll have knives," Bob said. "Maybe even guns."

James looked frantically around the room. He didn't do any hunting, so there weren't any rifles in the cabin. Not even a phone, so they could call for help. He remembered how insistent he'd been about there not being a phone in the cabin.

"I listen to phones ringing fifty weeks out of the year," he'd said. "For two weeks a year, I don't even want to know that phones exist."

Alice said, "James, what are we going to do?"

James got to his feet. The front door opened directly onto the living room. To the right was Bob's bedroom. A doorway led from the



living room to the kitchen. Off the kitchen was the other bedroom, and the bathroom. And the back door led from the kitchen out to the dock. There were windows in every room. There were no hallways, and no place in the house where you could stand and see both doors, front and back, at the same time.

James said, "Alice, go into the bedroom. Stay there. Don't move for anything. If you see someone at the window, shout."

"But—"

"Never mind. Just do as I say. *Hurry.*"

Bob was staring at him. "Dad—" he began.

Alice hurried out to the kitchen, and James turned to talk to his son. But the sound of footsteps on the porch caused him to swing about. He looked at the door, saw and heard the knob turning.

The door rattled, but the lock held precariously.

James shouted, "You better get away from here. We called the police."

There was a snicker from the

other side of the door, and a voice called, "Without a phone?"

"We have a phone," shouted James.

"Where's the wires?"

Bob was on his feet again. "Dad, let me go out there and talk to them."

"Don't be silly. Here—" James picked up two logs from the woodbox. "Take one of these. Stand by the kitchen door. If they start coming in, start swinging." He handed the log to his son, but the boy just stood there. "Go on!" James shouted. "Get the lead out!"

Bob took a deep breath. "If one of them sticks his head in," he said, "I'll knock it off him."

"Good boy." James watched his son go out to the kitchen. Then he walked over and stood beside the door. "You, out there," he shouted. "You'd better get away from here. I'm armed."

There was no answer. Were they still there? He waited, but there was no sound from the porch. Slowly, he moved over to the window, pried open the shade a fraction of an inch, and peered out at the porch.

There was no one there.

A sound behind him made him turn. One of them was coming out of Bob's bedroom—the one room that wasn't covered. He was tall, almost six feet, and was dressed in blue jeans and a leather jacket. His black hair was greasily-waved. He was grinning at James, and he was

holding a long thin knife, well away from his body.

He said, "Hiya, Pop."

From the kitchen, Bob shouted, "Dad! Are you all right in there?"

James felt a wetness on his forehead, his back. Sweat was running down his arms. "Stay out there!" he shouted to his son. "Stay by that door! I'm all right!"

"Not for long," greasy-hair said softly. He was still grinning as he came forward, moving slowly, cautiously.

James held his ground, staring at the knife. The piece of wood in his right hand seemed useless, ineffectual—stupid against that damnable knife.

The boy said, "Goodbye, Pop," and lunged.

James ducked involuntarily. The knife flashed in front of his eyes, and he felt a searing burn across his stomach, just above the belt. He backed away, terror a sour taste now in his mouth, looking down at the blood dribbling down over his belt.

The boy said, "Just nicked you that time, Pop. Next time I'll get you better. Next time I'll get you good."

James felt the wall against his back. He moved to his left, felt the other wall. He was in a corner. He stared, mesmerized, at the knife, swaying back and forth before him like the head of a snake. Distantly, he could hear Bob screaming at him.

"Stay out in that kitchen!" James shouted.

"Watch the knife, Pop," chanted the boy, and the knife swayed back and forth, back and forth. Then, abruptly, the boy leaped forward, and the knife came slashing in, and James held out the block of wood in frantic self-protection. He heard a solid *thunk* and a tremor moved up his right arm. The wood was torn from his grasp.

He realized his eyes were closed. He opened them, and stared at the boy, who was kneeling in front of him on the floor, fighting with something. Then he saw what it was. The knife! Somehow he'd managed to get the wood in the way, and the knife was stuck in it, driven deep into the thick block.

The boy looked up, and he wasn't smiling any more. James pressed the palms of his hands flat against the wall behind him, and kicked him in the face. The boy shrieked and fell backward. He lay on his back, spread-eagled, and James pushed away from the wall, and staggered out to the kitchen.

Bob was standing there, by the door, his face panic-stricken. He stared at his father, at the redness at his waist. "Dad!" he cried, and moved away from the door.

"Stay at the door!" James shouted at him, and then the door burst in, and the second young hoodlum was in the house. He stood framed in the doorway, staring at the two of them, seemingly surprised to see

James there, with his clothing drenched with blood.

Bob turned back to the door. "You dirty punk," he said, very softly, and swung the block of wood with all his might.

The youth was too surprised to duck. The log hit him flush on the mouth and he catapulted out into the darkness. They heard his body hit the dock, then roll off and splash into the water.

"One left," said James and on the heel of his words there was a scream from the bedroom.

They dashed in. Alice was cowering in a corner. "I got him," she said. "I got him. I got him."

They looked at the window. It was open just a few inches, and there was a head sticking through.

"I got him," said Alice. "He pushed the window up and started through, and I slammed the window down on him!"

James pulled his wife into his arms. "Honey," he whispered. "It's all right. They're all gone, it's all right now." He could feel the trembling lessening in her body as he talked to her and rubbed his hand against her hair.

He looked over Alice's shoulder at his son. Bob was standing there, the chunk of wood still in his hands, breathing heavily. "Do you see what I mean?" James asked him, and he could feel his voice shaking and didn't care. "There's teamwork," he said. "And then there's teamwork."

Sheriff Mike Spain didn't like to think there was an open season on murder in a county where gunfire was completely legal—for deer hunters.



THE BULLET FROM NOWHERE

A Chilling Murder Novelet

by PAUL W. FAIRMAN



THE SOUND OF gunfire was not uncommon in Barns County. It was so ordinary, in fact, that few heads were lifted from pillows if a rifle or a shotgun or an automatic pistol cracked in the night. Some character poaching a deer, would be the far-flung verdict when a shot echoed across hills that had known much violence in generations past; a maurauding woodchuck in someone's backyard; a dog in an isolated chicken house. No cause for excitement.

But upon a certain August night, two shots were fired within a span of ninety minutes in the wealthy Silver Hill section of the county. Both were aimed accurately and each brought sudden death to a surprised target. They were bullets of prime interest because, even in

Barns County, there was no open season on the human animal.

One of these killings got immediate attention, the slayer himself phoning in a prompt report, whereupon Sheriff Mike Spain—his deputy off for the day—drove out from Rathton and looked things over. The victim—not immediately identified—was removed to Allen's Funeral Home, Barns County's official morgue, where old Frank Allen got twenty-five dollars per corpse, and twice that sum if any processing became necessary.

Then, with the body disposed of, Mike Spain appropriated the death weapon, a .38 caliber revolver, and told the killer, one Brett Aperson, to go back to bed.

The night passed; morning came

on schedule, and around eight o'clock, a milkman discovered the body of the second victim, an unpopular Silver Hill resident named Lee Gaines; wealthy, lecherous, belligerent, a man who would not be widely mourned. He was found just inside the screened patio of his home with a neat bullet hole forming a third eye above the bridge of his nose, and rumor got around that he'd died with a surprised look on his arrogantly handsome face.

Both bullets—from killing One and Two—were retrieved in short order and Mike Spain, looking at them side by side on his huge, old-fashioned desk, was struck by their twin-like aspects. He put them in an envelope and ran them down to White Plains where the men in the police lab checked them out for him.

Spain was back in two hours and from force of long habit, stopped off at Oak Haven up on Silver Hill, to acquaint Bridget Rath with the findings. The bullets were twins; no doubt about it. Both had been fired from the same gun.

And Mike Spain—because he'd been a resident of Barns all his life and knew how things were—watched Bridget Rath's wrinkled old face very closely as he broke the news.

But she gave no indication of the inner satisfaction Spain had expected to bring out—had been sure he would bring out—because

he knew it was there. She merely said, "With this evidence, Mike, I assume you will arrest him."

"Of course, Bridget."

"Thank you very much for informing me."

So Mike Spain put the bullets in his desk and went up and arrested Brett Apperson, and Barns County had a sensation on its hand—a grade-A, illegal slaughter with no end of possible complications and excitement.

And Barns County sat back to watch, its attention quite naturally centered on Bridget Rath. How would Bridget take it? How would she react? The lucky old harridan! She'd been born with a horseshoe, that was for sure. Getting Brett Apperson by the throat this way proved you couldn't beat the old girl. You sure couldn't.

THE NEXT DEVELOPMENT came on the afternoon of Brett Apperson's first day in jail, when he sent out a call for Hawley Rath, Bridget's nephew. Hawley was closeted with Apperson for half an hour after which he returned to Oak Haven, the Rath estate on Silver Hill where he lived with his Aunt Bridget, and found a conference going on—a discussion between Bridget Rath and Reese Bagley, one of her many loyal adherents.

Bridget had no doubt been briefing Reese Bagley, and telling him exactly how she wanted things done. Hawley listened for a while

and then threw his bombshell and waited for the explosion.

But—as Mike Spain had been earlier—Hawley was disappointed, after which he lit a cigarette and told himself that ten years in Bridget Rath's household should have taught him better. She was iron rather than dynamite; congealed rock rather than flaming lava. She took the news without blinking an eye and spoke with cold contempt.

"The colossal gall of the man."

"Why do you say that, Aunt Bridget?"

"What else could I possibly say?"

"Apperson's entitled to—"

"I don't care what he's entitled to, Hawley. I forbid you to represent him. I absolutely forbid it. Do you understand?"

And Reese Bagley tried to help Hawley save face in his obedience by saying, "It's just good common sense, old man. Your first case and all that. Why start off with a loss? Brett Apperson hasn't got a prayer, you know."

"Things do look bad for him," Hawley admitted.

"The monumental nerve of him," Bridget Rath continued to marvel. "Committing a cold-blooded murder, in our very midst and then asking my nephew to defend him."

"Two murders," Hawley corrected.

Reese Bagley waved a negli-

gent, beautifully manicured hand. "Oh, the poaching thing. It doesn't count. Defense of home and hearth and all that. Some vagrant from upstate, as it turns out. No point in bothering with it."

Some vagrant upstater. That, Hawley realized, freed his aunt from any personal responsibility. Had the poor unfortunate been a Barns County hillbilly, the pronouncement of the County Attorney would have been far different, because above all else, Bridget Rath took care of her own.

Hawley regarded the handsome trial lawyer thoughtfully. "But you'll use it in case Apperson—"

"Comes clear? My dear boy. He's openly and publicly guilty of murdering Lee Gaines. Darrow couldn't get him off. So we'll let the devil try him on the lesser charge in hell."

Bagley was an expert with the well-turned phrase, and a master of the dramatic outburst. So it was logical that he should become a little flowery at times.

"Are you going to ask for the death penalty?"

"I've made no final decision as yet," Bagley replied, and Hawley managed to keep a smile from showing. Perhaps Reese hadn't decided but Bridget Rath had, and that ended the matter.

Hawley turned to the grim-faced old lady sitting erect as a poker in a straight-backed chair that bore a striking resemblance to a throne,



which indeed it was, so far as the bulk of Barns County residents was concerned.

Hawley said, "Then you're convinced, Aunt Bridget, that Apperson wants to retain me for no other reason than to humiliate you?"

"What other reason could he have?" Bridget Rath snorted. "Is it logical otherwise that a murderer would trust his life to a young, untried attorney?"

It seemed to Hawley that his aunt was not being very objective in taking for granted such great bravery on the part of Apperson, stemming either from great courage or a psychopathic sense of humor.

Then Reese Bagley cut in with: "I think surrender is the word rather than embarrassment. I be-

lieve Apperson is telling us that if we let him off this hook, we'll have no further trouble with him. He'd be willing to sell out, and leave Barnes. I doubt," he added, smiling, "that Apperson's dedication to what he calls civic betterment includes an election." "

Hawley Rath watched his aunt, chilled and fascinated by the calculation in her face. Was she actually considering negotiations on this level?

And Reese Bagley. Would the County Prosecutor meekly bow to her order in so vital a matter as this? The life or death of a fellow human used as a political pawn? Hawley lit a cigarette and wondered if the verdict in the coming case of the people versus Apperson was being rendered then and there in the throne room of Queen Bridget, Monarch of Barns County. A beleaguered monarch, true, but an iron-fisted ruler nonetheless. His mind drifted back . . .

. . . Hawley, you must never forget the background we have here in Barns. The responsibilities and obligations your father shirked and left me with as a young girl . . .

As a young girl. Good Lord! Hawley thought. Had Bridget Rath ever been young? Seeing her now in all her ancient rigidity, her time of youth was hard to visualize. He could see her only as having sprung full-blown and complete from the rocks of Barns County—

a miraculous embodiment of Rath steel through generations.

. . . In a sense, Hawley, we are Barnes County. Your great-great-grandfather held this land against Indians and when the time came, he helped kick English George into the sea, a leader in the Revolution . . .

A revolution? Hardly, so far as Barnes was concerned. More a transfer from one monarchy to another. And Great-great-grandfather Josiah had probably shown more stubbornness than brains, because while he'd been doing all that holding and kicking here in these rocky hills, some very shrewd folk had bought up a chunk of far more valuable property some eighty miles to the south.

For twenty-six dollars and a spot of whiskey, they'd acquired an island called Manhattan.

Scraps of family history passed on to Hawley by grim-lipped Bridget Rath. And the private little cynicisms with which Hawley amused himself. These last had no doubt been a weakness, symbolizing his refusal to take a stand against either his father or his aunt. He should have spoken up to Bridget Rath ten fat, comfortable years earlier, when he'd first come to her—a treasure of pure Rath blood—along with the body of his father for burial in sacred Rath soil.

Hawley's father had died in San

Francisco a week after his son's seventeenth birthday and the most vivid recollection in Hawley's memory-book was that of the coffin being shoved into the baggage car of the train that brought him east.

Hawley blinked. He'd been only vaguely aware of the words passing between his Aunt Bridget and Reese Bagley. Bridget had disposed of her nephew with a single, crisp directive and now she and her loyal man were discussing other aspects of the situation. But then Tillie came in to announce Jonas Larch, and Hawley, with a quick stab of inner guilt, brought his whole mind back to the time and the place as he concealed his uneasiness and waited for further developments.

Jonas Larch entered—dirty, unshaven, twisting a ragged cap in his hands—a Barnes Countyite far from typical in his shiftlessness and his eternal alcoholic fog, but still representative of the rugged native bloc from whom Bridget Rath derived her power. A burden to Bridget, who spent many of his nights in the Rathton pokey. In fact, he'd been in his usual cell on the night of the double murder, this proving to be the reason for his visit.

He grinned toothlessly and said, "Guess I'm in the doghouse ag'in, Bridget."

Bridget Rath regarded him critically. "You smell bad, Jonas.

Why don't you take a bath once in a while?"

Jonas Larch continued to grin and twist his cap. "Ain't much chance for a bath in jail, Bridget," he said.

"Or any place else so far as you're concerned. I suppose you've lost your job again?"

"Yep. Sam Tench wouldn't let me go out on the road truck this morning."

"Can you blame him? Sam's trying to keep the county roads in shape. He needs men he can depend on."

"Now Bridget—ain't nobody ever found fault with my work," Jonas said.

"Except that you're only there half the time," she pointed out. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. A pair of fine daughters like Bess and Ginny and you leave them to shift for themselves."

Jonas stopped grinning. "They got a good home—all paid for."

"That pigsty up in the hills? You could have made something of yourself, Jonas. You could have been somebody."

And it seemed to Hawley that his aunt's iron melted and that an alien softness—uncomfortable in its loneliness—strove for a handhold on her grim and ancient face. Odd. Why should this hapless derelict move her?

Bridget Rath sighed, the stiff, black taffeta rustling across her withered breast in the process.

"You could straighten out," she said with an equally alien wistfulness.

"Guess I could if I really took a notion."

She shook her head. "No. You're too old a dog, Jonas. Well, don't lose any sleep over it. I'll phone Sam Tench. Go back to the truck in the morning."

"Thank you kindly, Bridget. You're a fine woman."

"I'm a soft-hearted fool and you know it!"

Jonas turned and shuffled out and as he vanished Bridget Rath caught Reese Bagley's look of contempt and all the softness left her face. "Don't sneer down your nose at him," she snapped. "His family meant something in Barns before yours found its way out of the trees."

Bagley flushed. "I'm sorry, Miss Rath. I—"

Bridget turned her head briskly. "Where are you going, Hawley?"

"A few things I have to clear up."

"Will you be home for supper?"

"I don't think so. Don't wait."

"Very well—and Hawley—"

"Yes?"

"We—we understand each other?"

The question was inflected most eloquently. Hawley considered it but did not answer. If this annoyed Bridget Rath, she gave no sign as Hawley left.

II

HAWLEY RATH drove out of Oak Haven and down the twisting road into Rathton, the largest of Barns' four towns and its county seat. As he eased his lean little sports car around the hairpin turns, his aunt's stern face was still before him and an ancient Barns County conclusion came into his mind: *Beware of the wrath of Bridget*—words spoken in jest but with any laughter muted. Nor did Hawley smile now as he crossed the town and pulled up in front of the County Building.

It was an old, dignified pile, gleaming white, perfectly preserved. Its cornerstone, visible from where Hawley sat, read: *Erected In The Year Of Our Lord 1804 by Enoch Rath*. Also visible were crude chippings whereby some long-dead rebel had tried to make the inscription read: *Erected In 1804 By Enoch Rath And Our Lord*. A debasement rich in both meaning and irreverence.

Hawley could also see the jail, a small extension of the building, its windows efficiently barred. Brett Apperson was behind one of those windows—a man with much to think about. Apperson had incurred the wrath of Bridget and it was almost as though her gods had slugged him with a thunderbolt.

Hawley sat for some minutes. Then, still undecided, he re-started the car and continued on his way

through the outskirts of Rathton in the direction opposite to that of Silver Hill.

As he drove, he thought of Brett Apperson and his crusade against the rule of Bridget Rath. There had always been a rebel element in Barns County but until Apperson's arrival, three years earlier, it had been an unorganized band of grumblers.

Apperson began by buying the old Tolliver place on Silver Hill and fixing it over. That gave him property owner's rights and he made the most of them, speaking out boldly at town meetings:

"It appears to me that Barns County is fifty years behind the times because of the stubbornness and greed of one woman—Bridget Rath. Year after year, she has talked against progress until she has the majority of our population believing her outrageous philosophies of feudalism. While the areas around Barns County grow and prosper, 'Queen' Bridget tell us that we must protect our county from invasion by those who would come in and 'spoil the land,' as she puts it. She is referring to those who would like to come here and build homes and be good neighbors. Ladies and gentlemen—I demand the long overdue revaluation and reassessment in Barns County."

Bridget Rath vaguely reminded her nephew of the early western cattle barons who resisted the

breaking up of the land by homesteaders. Of course she could not enforce her will with guns, but the blocking of revaluation in the county was just as effective. With her own huge holdings as a core she had immobilized most of the county under a ridiculously low tax valuation that in turn supported isolationist zoning regulations. This gift of low taxes was the backbone that held her power erect. If she lost it, her political machine, even though formidable, would crumble.

And with Apperson as a rallying point for the dissidents, there had been, of late, a well-directed resistance that had the Queen's formidable back pressed almost to the wall.

So it was little wonder that all of Barns County awaited Bridget Rath's reaction to the murders that had confounded her enemy.

The luck of the Rathes, Hawley thought. It had been famous in Barns County ever since a Bible in Great-great-grandfather Enoch's hip pocket stopped the British ball that would have put him on the disabled list.

The sports car had been climbing steadily over ever-narrowing roads until Hawley was now deep in the Butcherville section of Barns County. Butcherville was not a town; merely a name given to a particularly wild and inaccessible area of the county where Rath faithfuls poached deer behind

the safety of Bridget's *No Hunting* signs.

Coming finally to the end of the road, Hawley got out of the car and took a pathway off to the left, a five-minute walk bringing him to a spot so rustically beautiful it could have been mistaken for a technicolor movie set. A small park set against the green forest wall just where a creek widened out into an idyllic little swimming pool.

The Hollywood effect was heightened even more by the slim, brown bikini-clad nymph who popped up out of the water to wave and call out, "You're late!"

The nymph's name was Bess Larch and the sight of her as she lifted her scantily clad tanned loveliness out of the water should have cheered Hawley. But today his load of depression was too great for even Bess to lift.

"A few things came up," he said, by way of reply.

"I got here half an hour ago." Bess unfolded a beach towel. "Sit," she commanded, and pushed Hawley down against a grassy bank. Then she laid the towel over him, sat down, drew it around herself, and nestled into his arms. "Kiss," she ordered.

After Hawley obeyed, she sighed like a contented kitten and said, "All right. Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"The murders of course. Brett Apperson must have gone crazy."

"He asked me to represent him."

Bess looked up at Hawley, her eyes wide. "Why that—that's crazy!"

"Aunt Bridget seemed to think so, too."

"From what I've heard around, he's guilty as sin."

"He appears to be."

"Exactly what do they think happened?"

"The way Mike Spain has it figured out, Apperson went over to see Lee Gaines last night."

"What for?"

"To talk about that piece of land they're fighting about."

"But it's such a stupid quarrel! Fifty square yards of rock. Why didn't they just split it down the middle?"

"The principle of the thing, I guess. Then too, Apperson got hostile about Gaines' arrogance. Gaines said he could probably prove ownership to half of Apperson's land if he wanted to dig back into the old surveys."

"It's too bad they had to buy side by side. Has Brett Apperson's wife been notified?"

"Yes. They caught up with her in Italy. She's flying back as soon as possible."

"That Lee Gaines was a heel!" Bess flared. "But you were saying—"

"The way it looks to Mike Spain, Apperson didn't even get into Gaines' house. He shot Lee



through the screen and then, on the way home, he bumped into the poacher there on his back land and shot him. That could have been self-defense, though. Apperson claims the poacher was drunk and threatened him with a rifle."

"Then he admitted killing the poacher?"

"Yes."

"What does he say about the rest of it?"

"He denies everything—even having been at Gaines' place."

"But the matching bullets—"

"That's where they have him."

"Isn't that enough evidence?"

"Enough to send him to the chair. Doc Brady says Gaines was killed within an hour roughly—one way or the other—of the time Apperson admits killing the poacher. Reese Bagley will of course argue that Gaines was killed first. That way, Apperson would have logically crossed paths with the poacher on his way home."

"Nobody's going to mourn Lee Gaines," Bess said. "Do you know what's going around already?"

"No."

"They're saying it's too bad Aperson didn't have a daughter. Then he could have claimed he was protecting her honor and he'd probably have been right."

Lee Gaines was a bachelor, a summer resident, who considered any attractive local female as fair game. "Whatever he did, he paid for it," Hawley said. "Your dad came to see Bridget today."

Bess shrugged. "He always goes to see her after they let him out."

"And she always intercedes for him."

"A habit, I guess. Oh, well—now he'll be good for another two weeks."

"Did he come to the drive-in last night before they locked him up?"

"No. He was higher than a kite by seven o'clock and Mike Spain picked him up in town. Ginny came over to the drive-in around nine and told me and I sent her to the jail with a quart of tomato juice. That straightens him out quicker than anything else."

Her light, almost callous attitude might have shocked Hawley had he not known her so well and not been aware that her pseudo-hardness was the only shield she'd ever found to hide a sensitive nature—a rather pathetic device against many in Barns County

who disapproved of "those wild Larch girls and their sot of a father."

He played with a ringlet of her shining auburn hair and was silent until she turned suddenly, her face to his. "There's something on your mind, darling. More than the murders, I think."

"Definitely."

"What, darling?"

"About us."

He felt her warm body tighten a little. "Oh, oh," she said. "Here it comes again."

"You're damned right!" he retorted with sudden heat. "I'm tired of sneaking around this way when there's no need of it. Are you ashamed of me or something?"

"Oh, darling! That's the craziest thing I ever heard!" She turned and kissed him in a fury as sudden as his own anger and he strove to think of her objectively—there in the hot smother of her embrace.

A strange girl, Bess Larch; a creature of hot, possessive passion but with a steel core deep inside. In some respects she reminded him of his Aunt Bridget. Her love made him dizzy at the same time her stubbornness infuriated him.

"I'm going to tell people about us," Hawley said.

"No. Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I've got a drunken bum for a father and an alley cat for a sister and I love them both." She buried her face again in his

arms. "Oh, darling! I love you so very, very much! I'm—I'm just all mixed up!"

"You're afraid of Bridget, aren't you?"

"I guess so."

"There's no need to be."

"What if she told you to stop seeing me?"

He was on the edge of flaring back but he checked himself. After all, why shouldn't Bess believe he'd obey such an order? Had he ever done anything to indicate otherwise? When Bridget Rath cracked the whip, everybody jumped, including her nephew.

"She likes your father," Hawley said lamely. "She likes you and Ginny."

"Are you serious? Do you think she'd let a Larch marry into the great Rath line?"

"It's just possible I might have something to say about that."

Bess gave her opinion of that chance by changing the subject. "Darling, you never told me much about your father."

"He was a free soul," he said. "Or at least that was what he called himself."

"Exactly what is a free soul?"

"I've never been quite sure. I guess it's a man who has plenty of money and spends his time following horses from one track to another. At least that's what we did."

"Was he a good gambler?"

"He didn't have to be. There

was always another check in the mail."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Here and there—after Mother died. I was seven then. And Dad taught me, too. He was a brilliant man. Then, after he died and Aunt Bridget decided the family needed a lawyer, I went to Harvard after high school. I passed the bar and—well, here I am. Any more questions?"

Bess was running a light finger along the bridge of his nose. "Your father and your Aunt Bridget weren't very friendly, were they?" she asked.

Hawley Rath shook his head. "They hated each other, I'm afraid."

Bess was silent for a few moments. Then she said, "Tell me, darling—why is there so much more hate than love in the world?"

"Are you sure there is?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't think so."

She replied with her lips against his. "Then prove it to me. Love me! We always have so very little time."

HAWLEY RATH drove down out of Butcherville with several conflicts ranging through his mind. Varied aspects of his past, present, and future seemed to converge at one point—with the personality and dominance of Bridget Rath confronting him in every direction.

He had analyzed the situation many times, so going over it again was a waste of time. There were no undiscovered points in their relationship to be explored. And even if there had been, he always came back to the same stone wall—Bridget Rath held the power of life and death over his financial future.

Benjamin Rath had arranged that at the turn of the century when he made his will. He believed in a single family with one head and had stipulated accordingly. Thus Bridget, to the day of her dying, could cut him off at any moment from the Rath fortune.

She had never cut his father off, but then John Rath never offended her in a positive way. His sins had always been negative—a stubborn refusal to conform. He had never defied her to the point of giving aid and comfort to her worse enemy.

But on the other hand, Bridget had been a benevolent despot, generous even to a fault with those who did not displease her. Thus, with no important issue ever at stake, Hawley had coasted comfortably along, telling himself that if an issue of importance ever did arise, he would be equal to the challenge.

So his attitude toward Bridget Rath had been negative also. But now the day of challenge was at hand. Retreat here would mark him indelibly as so many others

were marked—as Bridget Rath's people. Obey Bridget's directive and his contempt for Reese Bagley would merely reflect his own hypocrisy.

But then again, was the need for decision really that great? What about the other aspect? The one Reese Bagley had been careful to mention:

It's just good common sense, old man. Smart thinking not to. Your first case and all that . . . Brett Apperson hasn't got a prayer, you know.

And it certainly appeared that Apperson's chances were so poor that many lawyers would have refused his case. So why should Hawley Rath not be one of these? And quite honorably so. He hadn't set out to be a criminal lawyer in the first place.

So, all the way down from Butcherville, Hawley Rath negotiated his own self-surrender and was ready to sign the oath of eternal allegiance to Bridget Rath as he drove past the Rathton jail.

But something went wrong. He never knew quite what and may not have actually believed it—not until he found himself inside the jail looking through the bars into Apperson's cell and heard himself saying, "All right. If you still want me to represent you, I'll take your case."

A few minutes later, Hawley sat facing his client across a table in a small anteroom where Mike

Spain took them and left them alone—left them, Hawley was sure, to rush out and spread the news, word of which would find its way to Oak Haven in a matter of moments.

But it was with a sense of distinct relief that Hawley turned his attention to Apperson, the latter a different man, now; one who bore faint resemblance to the loud, confident extrovert who had rallied Bridget's foes and led the charge. Apperson was pale, unshaven, and he seemed to have shrunk considerably from his robust six-feet-three.

"Tell me about it," Hawley said.

Apperson shrugged wearily. "What is there to tell? Nothing you haven't already heard. I'm no murderer, Rath! I fired at the poacher when he aimed the rifle at me. Even if I'd had a tree I'd have ducked behind it, believe me! I didn't aim. I hit him by accident."

"That's not the killing we're worried about. You won't be tried for that one."

"You mean Gaines, then," Apperson said. "I'm even more innocent of that one."

"Then you told Mike Spain the truth? You were nowhere near Gaines' place last night?"

"I—well, I lied a little. Because I was scared, I guess. I was near his place."

"What time?"

"About six o'clock. I'd been thinking that our feud over that miserable hunk of rock was getting too public—setting up a bad image of me around the county. So I was going to settle it—give in if I had to."

"What was Gaines' reaction?"

"I didn't see him. I got within maybe two hundred yards of the place and for some reason I changed my mind."

"You decided not to settle with him?"

"No, but I figured I'd better do it differently. Send a go-between. If I wanted publicity, why make it so private?"

"So you went back home?"

"Yes."

"And heard the poacher outside later?"

"Uh-huh. Around nine o'clock. I thought it was an animal at first. If I'd known it was a human, I wouldn't have taken the gun. I tell you I'm no killer, Rath!"

"How do you account for the identical bullets?"

"I don't know. I just know I didn't kill Gaines."

"Could anyone have come in and taken the gun between the time of your visit to Gaines' place and when you heard the prowler?"

"Impossible—absolutely impossible. I was home all the time." Apperson passed a nervous hand through his uncombed hair. "Look here, Rath. Is there a chance in

hell of two guns being exactly the same?"

"You mean two guns that would fire bullets with exactly the same markings? I don't think so."

"But are you sure?"

"Anything is possible I guess. I imagine two sets of fingerprints could be identical but they've never found a case of it."

"That's the only answer—the only damned answer."

"I don't think hunting for the other gun would do us much good."

"Then I guess I'm sunk," Apperson groaned.

"Tell me—did you ask me to represent you in the hope Bridget Rath would use her influence in your behalf?"

Apperson studied Hawley through blood-shot eyes. "Look, son—I'm no hero. I'm just plain scared. Any help I can get from any direction will be welcome."

Hawley rubbed his chin reflectively. So Reese Bagley had been right. Apperson was frantically signalling complete surrender. "It won't do any good," Hawley said. "She rejected the idea when the County Attorney suggested it to her."

"Reese Bagley," Apperson said bitterly. "She's got him by the nose. She owns every damned official in Barns County."

Hawley could not deny that. "Perhaps you'd like to reconsider," he said. "Change attorneys. Get in

an experienced trial lawyer from New York City."

Apperson considered and shook his head. "With the evidence, I probably couldn't get a top man. No, I'll play it this way."

"Then I'll do my best for you."

"You do that, son." Apperson spoke like a man listening to his own death sentence. "You do the best for me you can."

A few minutes later, Hawley was back in Mike Spain's office where the sheriff peered over his glasses and said, "A fool trick, ain't it, boy? Going against your aunt?"

"The man's entitled to counsel, isn't he?"

Mike Spain nodded in agreement as he said, "Too bad it won't help him any. He shot the Gaines feller real good—right between the eyes."

"He says he didn't. He refuses to change his story."

"Son, I know you got to go through the motions, but it just ain't true."

"He admits now that he went within two hundred yards of the place. Around six o'clock."

"Getting a little closer, eh?"

"He was going to talk to Gaines but changed his mind. Then he went out and intercepted the prowler later."

"That ain't how it happened. He went to see Lee Gaines around nine o'clock. He killed Gaines and then bumped into the poacher on

the way back. Being kind of jittery, I guess, he killed the poacher too—sort of rounded out the evening you might say. Then he called me.”

“But he knew both bullets would be checked if he’d killed Gaines. So why wouldn’t he have made some gesture of defense? He could have hidden the poacher’s body and the thirty-eight, too. Why did he sit there waiting for you to come and get him?”

Mike Spain held up a protesting hand. “Hold it, now, son. I ain’t the judge and this ain’t no courtroom. I’m just a sheriff and I play ’em like I see ’em.”

“Do you honestly think Apperson is guilty?”

Spain jerked open the drawer of his big, old-fashioned desk. “There’s the gun, boy. It says he did it. And here in this envelope’s the slugs. Exactly alike and I mean exactly. They say he done it too.”

“There couldn’t be any possible mistake about the slugs?”

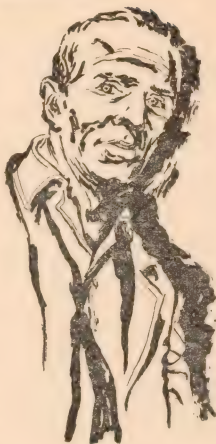
“There sure could, son. The kind of mistake that sends men like Apperson to the chair.”

“I see.”

Mike Spain threw a kindly look over Hawley’s shoulder at that moment and said, “Hello, honey. What can I do for you?”

Hawley turned and felt an odd surge of annoyance. Every place he went, it seemed, he was confronted by Larches.

This one was Ginny, a fair-



haired girl with everything it took to catch a man’s attention and it was common knowledge in Barns County that she did that regularly. She looked a great deal like Bess except that her mouth was fuller and had a sullen slant to it.

She said, “I came to get the jug I brought Dad’s tomato juice in last night. I forgot it.”

“Right there on the table, honey. How’s your dad feeling today?”

“I hope he drops dead!”

As she crossed to the table,

Hawley saw that her eyes were red from crying and that she was either frightened or angry, he couldn't tell which. "I've got to get this back to the drive-in," she said, and left without saying goodbye.

Mike Spain shook his head. "Poor kid! Talks rough but it's only a cover-up. Claims he can drop dead but she was right here trying to straighten him out last night. Stayed with him till he fell asleep."

Mike Spain had taken the envelope containing the slugs from the drawer of his desk. "You want to examine this evidence?"

Hawley shook his head. "I guess not. The hearing is set for tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yep. Ten o'clock. Judge Jack Purley presiding." Spain eyed Hawley with slyness. "You'll be there?"

"As attorney of record for the defendant," Hawley said crisply and left the jail.

But his show of confidence was just that—a show—and as he got into his car he wondered if Apperson had not done the only sensible thing in throwing himself on the mercy of Bridget Rath. Certainly no other intercession could possibly save him. And it occurred to Hawley that perhaps the only sincere gesture he could make for his client would be to petition the Queen's mercy.

But he knew he would never be able to bend to this, so its useless-

ness was a thing of oblique comfort.

HAWLEY'S AUDIENCE with Bridget Rath—after he got into it—was less painful than he'd expected. She sat in her straight-backed chair, and regarded him icily. She asked, "Why, Hawley? Why are you doing this to me? Your father. Now you."

"Any association you make is inaccurate. I'm not like Dad at all. In fact, he always accused me of the opposite—of being like you—when actually, you two were the identical pair."

"Poppycock," she flung back at him. "He was weak. He deserted his heritage—left me alone to assume the Rath responsibility in Barns County."

"He deserted you—not Barns County. And then wasted his life dramatizing a stupid defiance. But with the same stubbornness he claimed to despise in you."

"That's ridiculous."

Hawley ignored her denial. "My fault was in bending away from both winds. It was so much easier to say, *Yes Dad*, and *Yes, Aunt Bridget*—lulling myself with the fallacy that there was no point in taking a stand and that our differences were not important enough to justify the energy of standing up to you."

"And this is important? Defending an indefensible murderer? Humiliating me in public?"

He turned to her with outstretched hands. "Aunt Bridget! What's the point in your attitude? Can't you see that what I'm doing will bring even greater respect for the Rath name? It will mark us as fair-minded people. Getting even the already-condemned his day in court."

"We can't afford such childish luxuries. The Raths must stand together under one head. That's where our strength has always come from."

Hawley regarded her helplessly. "Aunt Bridget—in all the generations that the Raths built toward that one objective of family power, didn't conscience ever force a single one of them into a decision or an act?"

"We have always been an honorable family."

"I suppose so. I'm sure the executives of the Inquisition felt the same way about it."

"Are you saying I am dishonest?"

"Quite the opposite. I'm saying that you're dedicated to keeping the status of Barns County unchanged until you die. You don't judge progress on its merits. It would disturb your shabby little empire so it is automatically evil. Thus any act of yours to defeat progress, however ruthless, is justified."

Hawley had not intended to speak so cruelly, but the words were out and he saw the icy horror

in his aunt's eyes. "Why, you've been a traitor to the Raths from the very beginning," she said.

"And traitors are executed, aren't they?"

For one wild moment, Hawley expected her to pull a gun from under her skirt and slay him on the spot.

"It has always been considered a just reward."

She meant financial execution in his case, of course; his career in Barns County savagely demolished. And yet he could not censure her for this. She was only being true to her code. Jet black or pure white; a devoted ally or a deadly enemy. For Bridget Rath, there was nothing in between.

"You naturally wish me to leave Oak Haven."

"I prefer you stay—for the time being."

He smiled without mirth. She wanted him at hand—to be lashed out of the old family manse at her leisure. It would have been comical on a stage, an ancient plot with all the old clichés. But here it was a tragedy of rot and disintegration.

Hawley moved toward the door, then stopped and turned and asked a sudden question: "Aunt Bridget, was there ever anything between you and Jonas Larch?"

The color that flared into her cheeks was like long-dead youth rising from a grave. She came partly out of her chair and her eyes turned deadly. "I shall in-

struct Reese Bagley to make a complete fool of you at the hearing tomorrow," she said.

Again, Hawley Rath had made an exit marked with a confidence he did not feel. As he drove down off Silver Hill, he cursed the intangible deep within him that was forcing him to make this stand. After all, if he were defending an innocent man there would be some excuse.

But why make this gesture for a man whose conviction would be automatic?

Able to give himself no convincing justification, Hawley drove the debate from his mind and turned to summing up what he knew of the case.

The people's version: Against a background of acknowledged enmity and various irresponsible threats, one Brett Apperson took a .38 caliber revolver and upon the night in question, at approximately the hour of nine p.m., visited his known enemy, one Lee Gaines, and killed said enemy with a single shot from the revolver. Upon returning toward his own home after the murder, he came upon a trespasser on his property and killed him also.

The defendant's version: Apperson heard a prowler on his premises and went out to investigate. He did indeed come on said prowler who threatened him with a rifle and Apperson did indeed slay said prowler, but not within

the concept of murder as generally accepted. All else, he denied.

The area of agreement: That Apperson called Sheriff Mike Spain and confessed the killing of the prowler, whereupon Spain confiscated the weapon, did the necessary relative to the body, and returned to his office.

Returned to his office.

The fact thudded against Hawley Rath's mind as he pulled in under a gaudy neon sign—*The Spic and Span*—on Route 22, and saw Bess Larch through the windows of the diner; Bess Larch, achingly attractive in her crisp uniform as she went about her duties.

As he was getting out of his car, Hawley noticed Ginny Larch's '54 Ford parked nearby. He sank back in the seat and lit a cigarette and waited, passing the time by watching Bess at her work. She went on duty at six and stayed until closing, after which she and Hawley usually had their time together.

Five minutes passed. Then Ginny Larch stormed out of the diner, lunged toward her car, and went away on screaming rubber. She looked neither left nor right. *Those wild Larch girls*, Hawley thought, and went inside and sat down at the far end of the counter.

A mild rush ended in about five minutes, after which Bess brought two cups of coffee and sat down beside him. "It would be awfully nice if you could kiss me," she said.

"I could if you weren't so all-fired shy about people knowing we're acquainted."

"But we don't want to lose what we've got."

"At least you could tell Ginny. It's weird, having my future sister-in-law treat me like a stranger."

Bess had been smiling. The smile vanished now and she said, "I'm worried about her."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, she won't talk about it. But she seems so—so desperate."

"A new love affair?"

A touch of bitterness came into Bess' voice. "Hardly that. Her reaction would be different."

Hawley laid his hand over hers. "Don't worry, everything will work out all right," he said, wondering if his words had a hollow ring to them.

"Will I see you tonight?"

"I'll try to get back before closing time. I have a few things to do."

"Then you're really taking the Apperson case?" Bess asked.

"Yes."

"Did you tell Bridget?"

He nodded. "I told her."

"How was it?"

Hawley smiled winningly. "Not good. In fact, real bad. How would you like a penniless young lawyer for a husband: One who couldn't get work in Barns County, even if he did it for free?"

"That would be wonderful. I'd



keep on working and you could hoe the garden."

"It looks like it will be that way, too. Be seeing you," he grinned. "And consider yourself kissed."

Fifteen minutes later, he was parked in front of the County Building. He looked at the cornerstone and said, "No offense, Grandpa Enoch, but I wish that bullet had gotten you—right where it was aimed."

But he was really thinking about another bullet, and a vague idea was beginning to form in his mind. He mulled it over a while, approached it carefully from several directions like a mongoose harrying a cobra. Then he got out of his car and went into the jail where Mike Spain sat with one leg propped on his desk.

"Mike, where did you go last night after you took Brett Apperson's gun away from him and left his house?"

"I came back here."

"And that deputy of yours—Chet Maas. I haven't heard his name mentioned lately. Was he fired?"

"Nope. The county budget still allows for him."

"Where was he last night?"

Mike Spain's old eyes twinkled. He was openly amused. "Look here, son. You want a minute-to-minute account of our whereabouts?"

"It wouldn't do any harm."

"All right. Yesterday was Chet's day off. He was down in Westchester visiting an old war buddy. On the way back he got word of the trouble and was in the office here, waiting for me, when I got back from Apperson's. Matter of fact, it was him that let Ginny Rath in to see her dad with the tomato juice, so we got us a witness."

"What happened after you got back?"

"Well, let's see now. There was a little brawl reported in a tavern out on Route Fifty-two and I went to see about it. Chet, he went down on Twenty-two and got a bite to eat and then came back here and watched things. We played a little cribbage after that. Things stayed pretty dull all night—matter of fact, right up to this morning." Mike Spain yawned. "Today's gone along at a right smart clip."

"It has been pretty active, hasn't it? Where's Chet Maas now?"

"Son, you trying to make out that Chet or me had anything to

do with the Gaines killing? Now how in Tophet would you ever get anybody to believe that?"

"You didn't like him, did you?"

"Who did? He treated our women right shabbily. You know that, Hawley. In fact, I've been thinking—"

"Thinking what?"

"That if somebody had to get killed it couldn't have happened to a nastier citizen."

"Then we've got one point in Apperson's favor."

"Trouble is nasty citizens rate just as much help from the law as decent ones. Ain't supposed to go around killing them. You got a place to sleep tonight?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Kind of thought maybe Bridget threw you out," Spain said. "Wouldn't put it past her."

"No. I've still got a bed and a roof."

"Well, make the most of 'em, boy. You probably won't have for long."

Hawley left the jail but he did not return to *The Spic and Span*. An idea was shaping in his mind—an idea he didn't like and he wanted to be alone for a time to fight with it.

THE PRELIMINARY hearing in the case of *The People versus Apperson* convened to a packed house and Hawley Rath noted sourly that if ever a man looked guilty, that man was his client. Apperson

wore the same rumpled clothes he'd been arrested in. His unsteady shaving hand had slashed his jowl in two places, and his face was drawn and haggard from lack of sleep.

After the opening formalities Judge Purley, a fawning old legal hack who functioned by the grace of Bridget Rath, prepared to hide his congenital incompetence with a statement.

"Now this isn't a trial, so we won't be too formal. We're here to get at the truth, and that's how I'll run things."

Reese Bagley, looking like a Madison Avenue clothes horse, smiled his agreement and at that moment a hush dropped over the courtroom. The door had opened. Bridget Rath, grim as coming judgment in her black taffeta, entered the room and took the front seat reserved for her.

She did not look at Hawley but her presence shook him. He hadn't expected her to appear but her reason for being there was obvious. She wanted to see her ace prosecutor cut her disowned nephew into bits.

Apperson leaned close to Hawley and said. "Why the hell don't you talk to her?" His hoarse whisper was filled with fear and surrender.

Hawley scowled. Apperson evidently thought a nod from the Queen would save him.

And it probably would.

"—and so there will be little difficulty in proving the guilt of the defendant," Reese Bagley was saying as he closed his opening address. "We will show beyond all doubt that Brett Apperson killed Lee Gaines deliberately and with premeditation."

Judge Purley seemed to approve. He peered at Hawley. "Has the Defense any opening statement?"

Hawley got to his feet. "Your Honor, I didn't know one was required at a preliminary hearing. But in any case, my client is innocent of the charge and that, I shall so prove."

There was no reaction in the courtroom, the spectators taking the words as routine, and Hawley, as he heard his own voice echo through the ancient hall, almost wished that they were. He sat down and the hearing got underway, Reese Bagley bringing in his parade of witnesses.

Leo Finch, a milkman, testified to discovering the body; Old Doc Pearson, the County Coroner, gave the cause of death; a White Plains lab expert testified as to the ballistics. But at no point did Hawley Rath cross-examine, a fact that seemed to disturb Reese Bagley. After all, how could he do a job on his opponent if he couldn't get at him?

At one point, when Hawley refused to cross-examine the ballistics expert, Bagley had a com-



ment. "Perhaps," he said, "the attorney for the defense is also convinced of his client's guilt."

"I object, Your Honor," Hawley said, but he spoke without heat, almost listlessly.

"Oh, this is just a hearing as I said," Judge Purley replied. "But I guess we better strike the remark." His tone indicated it didn't matter much one way or another.

Hawley didn't seem to resent either the tone or the words. His eyes kept drifting over the courtroom as though the verdict lay somewhere out there. He regarded his aunt briefly but she refused to

favor him with even a return glance.

Bess and Ginny Larch sat together and Bess' eyes were for Hawley alone but he acted as though she were not present. Two rows back, Jonas Larch chewed tobacco and enjoyed the proceedings. Obviously he'd stayed off work for the day.

Only when Bagley put Mike Spain on the stand did Hawley come to life by way of cross-examination. He approached the witness chair and said, "Mr. Spain, I'm interested in your movements after the discovery of the body of an unidentified man on the defendant's premises the night before Lee Gaines' body was discovered. I want to know exactly—"

"I object, Your Honor," Reese Bagley said. "I hesitate to highlight the defense counsel's lack of legal knowledge, but no groundwork has been laid for such a statement."

"Objection sustained," Judge Purley snapped.

Hawley sighed. "Very well, Your Honor. I took you at your word when you said this hearing would be informal. I'll lay the groundwork."

Reese Bagley, having made his point, waved a patronizing hand. "I withdraw the objection—"

"After it has been sustained?" Hawley asked in wonder.

Reese Bagley reddened slightly but Judge Purley came to his res-

cue. "Ask your questions!" he barked.

"Thank you." Hawley turned to Mike Spain. "Please tell us exactly what you did after you left Brett Apperson's home as I previously outlined."

"I'd already made arrangements for the disposal of the body, so I went straight back to my office and put the gun in my desk and—"

"Who was in the office at the time?" Hawley turned and looked again at the spectators. Good God! Were they utterly stupid? Couldn't they see what he was driving at? And Reese Bagley. Was the man so blinded by complacency and conceit that he didn't know what was going on?

Hawley cringed at the memory of his long, sleepless night during which he'd faced the truth and found it incredibly bitter; when the temptation to turn and run was almost irresistible.

"My deputy, Chet Maas," Mike Spain was saying. "A prisoner was in one of the cells—Jonas Larch. His daughter Ginny Larch was with him—feeding him tomato juice."

Hawley heard the ripple of laughter but did not turn to see the effect of the testimony. "And what did you do immediately thereafter?"

"I went out on a call."

"And how long were you gone?"

"About two hours."

Hawley turned away. "No more questions." As he walked back to his client he saw that Bess Larch had fled the room. Ginny still sat huddled on the bench and Jonas was chewing his tobacco with no sign of embarrassment.

A short while later, Hawley heard Reese Bagley's assured voice: "The People rest, Your Honor." He looked coldly at the defense table. "Our evidence, I believe, is more than ample. The defendant stands guilty."

Hawley Rath scarcely heard the words. He was thinking: Why shouldn't I withdraw? The truth will come out. Any trial lawyer could find it. Brett Apperson will be released. But even while thinking these thoughts, he heard himself saying, "I call Brett Apperson to the stand."

This sent a ripple through the courtroom. No one had expected Hawley to put his client at the mercy of Reese Bagley through cross-examination. Then Apperson was sworn in and Hawley was saying: "Mr. Apperson, I'm going to ask you one question and only one and I want the truth. Did you kill Lee Gaines?"

Hawley bellowed out the question with all the hostility of a belligerent prosecutor and there was a dead silence in the courtroom. Brett Apperson blinked in surprise, then said, "As God is my judge—I did not!"

But there was no triumph in

Hawley Rath's manner as he turned away. "That's all," he said, and his shoulders seemed to sag.

Reese Bagley was studying Hawley with the first appearance of alertness that he'd displayed the whole morning. He was frankly puzzled but whether by the question or by Hawley Rath's manner was not apparent.

"No questions," he said.

Apperson returned to his seat and Hawley faced the court. He stood for a few moments, until Judge Purley snapped, "All right, Counsellor. Let's get on with it."

"I think I stand alone in all of Barns County," Hawley said, "as a believer in my client's innocence. Brett Apperson is not guilty of the murder of Lee Gaines. This I intend to prove." He turned and faced the courtroom. "I call Virginia Larch to the stand."

Reese Bagley was on his feet. "To what purpose does defense counsel call this girl?" he demanded, and Hawley Rath turned on him in a sudden new mood of anger.

"The prosecutor should have more sense than to ask a question like that. Is he presuming now to pass on my witnesses before they testify?"

Judge Purley was looking to Bagley for guidance. When he didn't get it, he motioned to the clerk. "Swear in the witness."

Hawley stood by the witness chair as Ginny sat down. Her face

was pale, worn, and she appealed to him mutely. He ignored the appeal but his voice was gentle as he spoke.

"There are some points that must be cleared up, Ginny. First, when Sheriff Spain left the jail on the night in question, you were in a cell administering to your father. Is that not true?"

Ginny swallowed. "Dad was drunk. I went there with some tomato juice. That always helps him."

There was no ripple of amusement—no snickers—as Hawley went on. "And you were still there when he returned?"

"Yes."

"Were you aware of where he'd been?"

"I came out for a minute when he got back and he said Brett Apperson had killed a prowler on his land."

"Were you and your father alone in the jail when Sheriff Spain left on that call?"

"Yes," Ginny said.

"But you were not locked in the cell with your father."

"No."

"Then I take it this was more or less an established practice—that you came to the jail often to be with your father, because he was arrested quite often."

"He got drunk. Dad spent lots of nights in jail."

Ginny Larch was answering the questions without feeling; like a

person under a spell, and a ripple of laughter was just starting as Reese Bagley said, "Your Honor. This line of questioning is entirely out of order. Counsel for the defense is showing a pitiful lack of knowledge as to court procedure. He is—"

Hawley turned on both Reese Bagley and Judge Purley with a sudden viciousness that stilled the room. "Listen here! I've had about enough of this farce! Neither of you has the least desire to see justice done."

Shocked by the outburst, Judge Purley reverted to type. "Listen here, young feller!" he squealed. "I'll throw you in jail for contempt!"

"All right! Go ahead! But I say you're no judge and that stuffed shirt there is no lawyer. You're both a couple of pitiful stooges for the real power that runs this county and if I'm not allowed to finish my cross-examination of this witness, I'll see that both of you are disbarred!"

Judge Purley gulped, not so much from fear as from consternation. He'd never before faced such a situation. In all his previous cases there had been only respect, so now he didn't know what to do.

Reese Bagley's reaction was somewhat different. He was in the grip of a consternation also but he strove to rationalize Hawley's action. Hawley was inviting a contempt citation; going out of his



way to earn it. Or was he under some inner pressure that was forcing him to the verge of irrationality so far as a courtroom was concerned?

Reese Bagley glanced in Bridget Rath's direction. Then he said, "The prosecution is willing to overlook the counsellor's outburst—in the interests of justice."

Judge Purley, glowering, took his cue from Bagley. He said, "Question your witness, young feller. The Court will hold the contempt citation under advisement."

Hawley turned back to Ginny Larch. "After Sheriff Spain left on the call in question, you were alone in the unlocked jail with your father?"

"Yes, but a little while later Chet Maas came in."

Hawley glanced across to where Mike Spain sat with his deputy. Spain was not enjoying these revelations of the free and easy way he ran his jail.

"And he stayed until Sheriff Spain got back?"

"Yes."

"After Sheriff Spain returned, did he remain at the jail?"

"No. He went out on another call."

"I see. And Deputy Maas?"

"He went out too. He said he hadn't eaten and he was going to the Spic and Span for a sandwich," Ginny said.

"And how long was Deputy Maas gone?"

"A little over an hour."

"You were in the jail, then, when he got back?"

"Yes. Dad had gone to sleep. I was just about to leave."

"But during that hour—did you remain in the jail?"

"I—yes, yes. I stayed there."

And now Hawley turned on Ginny Larch with the same fury he'd aimed at the Court. "That's a lie, Ginny! You know it's a lie. You'd seen Sheriff Spain put the murder gun into the drawer of his desk. The gun was there and you were there—alone. And you were tempted, Ginny—tempted to kill the man you hated—the man who'd abused you and then promised to marry you and then backed down!"

Ginny's control snapped. Her eyes turned wild. "I loved him! No, no! I hated him!" She put her hands to her face. "Oh, God—I'm going to have a baby."

"But you did go up there and kill him!"

"I didn't mean to. I don't think I meant to. I wanted to scare him.

Then he wouldn't even let me in. He laughed at me there inside the patio. I—"

"You killed him, didn't you, Ginny?"

"Yes—yes. I killed him! Now let me alone."

"Then you came back, returned the gun to the drawer, and waited for Deputy Maas to return."

"Yes—yes. I was was going to tell him. But I was scared. Please—please—no more."

Hawley turned away, feeling empty and dry and exhausted; feeling like an old man.

"The defense rests," he said.

Hawley Rath did not sit down after he returned to the defense table. He stood beside it, gripping its edge. He was aware of Apperson's hysterical thanks and brushed the man away almost rudely. He was aware of the courtroom emptying until he was alone.

No, not quite. Bess Larch had returned and she stood silent in the aisle beyond the railing, staring at him. There was much in her face; shock, anger, but above all, hatred, and all these emotions remained there as he approached her.

They stood face to face for a long moment, then Bess raised her hand and slapped him. It was an odd slap not reflecting in violence, the emotions in her face; more a declaration, a formal gesture of contempt.

"I'm sorry," Hawley said.

She turned and walked away

and he was left alone in the courtroom and after a while he realized he'd been there a long time.

VERY LATE THAT afternoon, he returned to Oak Haven for his things. He tried to enter quietly but as he approached the stairs he heard his aunt call from her sitting room.

"Hawley? Come in here, please."

He entered the room and stood before her. "Yes, Aunt Bridget?"

She did not look at him, her eyes remaining on the big oak tree visible through the window. "Yes," she said, "there was something between us. A long time ago. Jonas Larch was different then. A god of a man—and lover. We were both in our early twenties and there was a time of happiness. Then he asked me to marry him. That ended it."

"Why?"

"He wasn't suitable as the husband of a Rath. Your grandfather judged against him. I obeyed. There was my responsibility."

As simple as that, Hawley thought. Not suitable. Thus did iron will direct lives into cold dedication.

"But you did nothing for Bess and Ginny—girls who could have been your daughters."

Bridget Rath did not choose to answer. She turned her face toward his and he was struck by a look seldom seen there—a smile of

mockery. "It's time you understood yourself, Hawley. You feel you've moved bravely off in new directions but you haven't. You have only accepted your heritage. You haven't broken with the Rathes. You've finally joined us."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

Her smile turned oddly malevolent. "We Rathes and our dedications! My own shabby little empire. Your father's ridiculous concept of personal freedom. Your idiotic martyrdom for what you call your integrity. We rationalize them, of course, but we understand them also, because to do otherwise would be a stupid weakness. The causes we chose to espouse are only showcases for display of the stubbornness we were born to. So you haven't escaped your blood line, Hawley. You've merely confirmed it."

Her accusation could not be dismissed. It would take some thinking out. But there was enough surface truth in it to bring shock. She saw it in his eyes and knew she had scored.

She asked, "What will you do now?"

"Go away for a while, I think."

"I've heard rumors already of an offer."

This did not surprise him. "The Taxpayers' Association. They approached me. They want me to take over leadership. Apperson is through. He's pulling out."

"Will you accept?" she asked.

"I don't know. Actually it makes no difference so far as the end is concerned. The revaluation will go through. You can't stop it."

"I'll try. I'll fight it right to the end."

Even as he answered, he realized his words would have been different on the previous day; different on the morning of that same day. "I know. You can't quit. I think I would lose respect for you if you did."

Her eyes softened. "Is that all there is, Hawley? Only respect?"

"My respect for you is—boundless."

She made an effort at lightness in her reply. "Spoken like a true Rath. Are you leaving now?"

"Yes."

He turned away, reached the doorway, before she stopped him.

"One more thing," Bridget Rath said. "This is still your home. I'll expect you back."

He smiled as he left. Perhaps there was love. At least, there was an affection for this iron woman who could not form an invitation—a peace gesture—into other than a command.

Later that evening he waited for the 9:14 out of Rathton, sitting alone beside the dark station, when he heard footsteps approach-

ing from behind him. Bess, of course, but he knew only her identity, not why she came. After this day's business she could conceivably have a gun with her—a knife or a club. She could have sought him out with some tool of hatred.

He did not move. She stopped there behind him. Then her voice; husky, a little hesitant: "You can't go away. You've got to stay and defend her. You can't do what you did and then just walk away."

"Of course," Hawley said. "If you want me."

She sat down beside him on the bench. "We both want you."

He could not quite accept her words. "You can't still feel the same way. It's impossible—after what I had to do."

"That's the point. After what you had to do. I understand you so well, my darling. I'm not Bridget Rath. Not a steel woman. I'm just Bess Larch, and I love you."

I'm just Bess Larch, and I love you.

He wanted to ask her to say it again—and again. But he took her hand and held it in silence and felt better. Things were going to be all right. Things were going to be just fine.

It was just a matter of learning to be a Rath.

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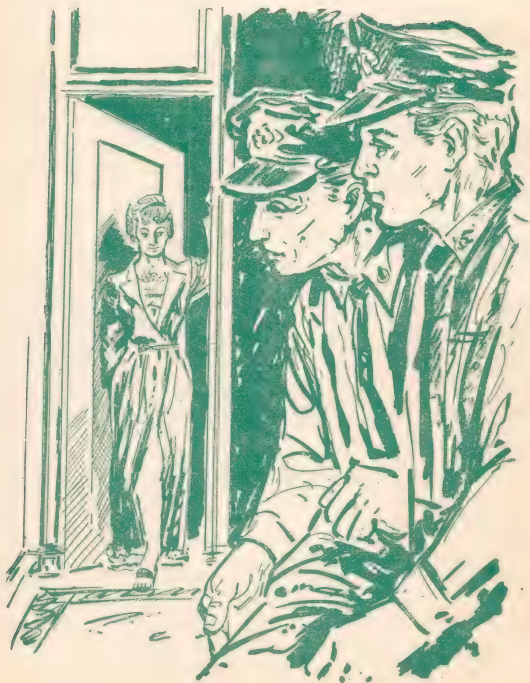
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FEB. 101

A Taut Story of Terror in the Night.



CRY WOLF

To Callaghan she was the most beautiful female in Manhattan. So how could a young cop ignore her appeal for police protection?

by JACK LAFLIN

IT WAS EXACTLY 12:03 A.M. when the first call was received at Communications. The cop on the switchboard could understand her only with difficulty, so low and frightened was the voice.

"I heard a man at the door, Officer. A scratching noise, as if someone were trying to break into my apartment. I'm scared."

"Take it easy, lady," the duty man advised. "What's the address?"

Quickly, jerkily, she whispered one on West 93rd.

"Name?"

"Susan Levensger." She added unnecessarily, as if reluctant to end the conversation, "I live alone."

"Apartment number?"

"One-J."

"Right. There'll be a couple of officers up in a few minutes."

The duty man unplugged the jack, pulled toward him a form headed *Central Complaint Desk Report*, rapidly scribbled on it the essentials, dropped it into a pneumatic tube.

The container rocketed through crisscrossing copper coils until it fell, several seconds later, in a basket at the side of Sergeant Pekarski, the Manhattan North radio dispatcher.

Reading the message, Pekarski flipped on his mike.

"Available Two-Four Unit," he intoned, asking for a freed radio car in the Twenty-fourth Precinct.

Turning the green and white cruiser north out of 89th onto Amsterdam, Carm di Napoli shot a quick look at his watch and wondered why. At 12:04 A.M. they had just come on duty for the midnight-to-eight tour. Later was time enough to calculate how soon they could pack it in, certainly not now. At forty-four, with nearly

twenty-one years on the force, clock-watching was still a habit to the veteran di Napoli.

While they halted for a red light, he stared over at his partner, Dan Callaghan, asking himself, how the hell does he do it?

Callaghan was twenty-seven, with crew-cut blond hair and a chubby Hibernian face that constantly crinkled with laughter. They had been together for two years now.

Di Napoli decided to put his question into words. "Dan, how much longer do you think you can keep up this rat race? I'll bet you're lucky if you average four hours sleep a day."

Callaghan pushed the visor of his uniform hat off the bridge of his nose and sat upright. He yawned prodigiously, then shook his head as if to clear away the cobwebs.

"Oh, it isn't so bad, Carm. I catch up on sack time during my forty-eights. *And* studying. A man wants anything in this world, he's just got to go after it. I happen to want to be a lawyer, and Fordham's the closest school I can find. When my father, God rest his soul, fell off that scaffold five years ago, he didn't leave hardly enough to bury him, let alone money for Mom to live on, plus my tuition. So I have to do it this way. It'll only take a few more years, then I'll—"

Sergeant Pekarski's voice crackled over the radio. "Available

Two-Four Unit. Broadway and Nine-Three. Investigate possible prowler."

"Oh-oh," Di Napoli said, flicking on the switch that activated the red flasher and mashing down on the gas pedal. "That's us. It starts early tonight."

Callaghan grinned. "Yeah, so it seems." He picked up the hand mike. "Central. Two-Four. Unit Seven-Three-Nine responding."

The cruiser roared through a signal light on Broadway, past passenger cars, trucks and taxis pulled in at the right curb, at length screeching to a skidding halt at the corner of 93rd. Di Napoli and Callaghan piled out, sped toward the entrance of the address, loosening revolvers in holsters as they ran.

It was an old apartment building, not really run-down but merely shabby, long by-passed in the relentless march of modernization east and south. In the hallway, the two officers slowed their pace, approaching more cautiously. Ranged on either side of the door to 1-J, as police procedure dictated, Callaghan raised a fist, beat a soft-knuckled tattoo to announce their presence.

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other side of the portal, followed by silence. Callaghan looked inquiringly at Di Napoli, who shrugged.

"Another kook, maybe," he suggested, not very helpfully.

In a few seconds, a voice patently quavering with terror came through to them.

"Wh-wh-who is it?"

"Police officers. We were sent to investigate a possible prowler at this address."

"Oh. Just a minute."

They heard the rattle of a chain and the metallic noise of lock tumblers. The door swung inward. Dan Callaghan, peering from around the jamb, opened his eyes wide. Simultaneously, his heart began to pound hard enough to pop the buttons off his winter uniform coat.

Framed there in the doorway, with a soft, muted light behind her, stood undeniably the most beautiful female in the borough of Manhattan. Coppery red hair surmounted a delicate oval of a face encompassing green eyes, long lashes, a pert turned-up nose, kissing-ripe lips slightly parted over a set of even, white teeth. She wore a bathrobe, frilly nightgown and tiny fur mules.

She would, Callaghan guessed, go maybe five-three and one-ten, although he had experienced little frame of reference recently by which to formulate such an accurate opinion. Though small of stature, she had been endowed by her Creator with certain architectural features even the thick folds of the robe failed to conceal.

Between law classes, police department tours and caring for his

widowed mother, Dan Callaghan had simply had no time for girls. Hence, it was small wonder that at that precise moment, without right, rhyme, reason or prior acquaintance, he fell hopelessly and totally in love.

Noting his partner's slack-jawed, astonished stare, Di Napoli stepped into the breach. "Miss Susan Levenger?" he asked, opening his notebook.

The girl nodded.

"What's the story, miss?"

Callaghan walked over to join Di Napoli, feeling sheepish and stupid but unable to do much about it. For the first time, the young woman caught sight of him fully. Was it his imagination, he wondered, groping futilely for some slight area of encouragement, or did she cast an approving glance at what she saw too? No, impossible, he told himself; she can't be having the same reaction!

The older officer coughed diplomatically. "Ha-hmmm. Miss Levenger, I'm Patrolman Di Napoli. This is Patrolman Callaghan, from the Twenty-fourth Precinct. Could we come in and get the details? It's drafty out in this hall and you—eh—do have night clothes on."

"Of course," she said. "I'm sorry. I've been so frightened I forgot my manners."

She led the way into a small living room, indicated a sofa for Di Napoli and Callaghan, and sat her-

self down in an overstuffed chair, drawing her legs under her.

With all the wisdom drawn from nineteen years of marriage and seven assorted offspring, Di Napoli correctly sized up the situation. With the wondrously quick romantic nature of the Irish, Dan Callaghan had gone and gone hard for Susan Levenger. Thinking back to the courtship of his own wife, Rosa, remembering three years of trying to save enough money to furnish a dingy apartment in the Bronx, their distantly correct behavior when both wanted the other, as a drowning man covets a life preserver, Di Napoli questioned whether the older way were superior or the newer.

Hell, didn't they have instant coffee and frozen food and sixty-second films? So why could a man not fall in love in like manner? Secretly, he wished Callaghan success in his quest.

A moment later, he was back to the business at hand. Long experience had taught him to slice quickly through trivia, probe directly into the core of a complaint.

"Now, Miss Levenger, will you tell us exactly what happened?"

The girl lit a cigarette before she answered. "Well, I worked late last night at my office. I'm a legal secretary for Bowman, Berenstein, Edwards and Claason down on Vesey Street. I had a whole bunch of briefs to type up. It was about ten-fifteen when I arrived

home. I took a bath, watched the eleven o'clock news on TV, then some of the Johnny Carson show. Around midnight I switched the set off and got ready for bed. It was then I heard the noise at the front door."

"What did it sound like, exactly?"

"I don't really know, Officer. It lasted only a few seconds, then stopped, as if whoever was making it was suddenly scared away."

"Could it have been a jimmy, something of that nature?" Di Napoli inquired.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. To be honest with you, it sounded more like a key being inserted in the lock and very gingerly turned. I know that's impossible, because I have the only key except for the super's master. It couldn't have been he, though, because it's Thursday and he's always off, visiting his mother in Brooklyn. Anyway, why would he try to get into my apartment?"

"We can't answer that, ma'am." Callaghan uttered his first words since having caught sight of Susan Levenger.

Di Napoli was happy to note Callaghan had regained the power of speech. It was simply too much to ask of a man, that he go seven more hours on a midnight-to-eight with a silent partner. "We'll have a look around, though, if we may."

"Certainly. I'll show you where everything is."

The apartment was small, consisting of the room in which they sat, a bedroom, bath and tiny kitchen. Callaghan noticed the floppy dolls on the satin bedspread, the feminine gear strewn around, caught a whiff of a fragrance he



couldn't identify but instantly liked. He sighed. How the hell was a man supposed to keep his mind on his work in a lash-up like this?

Nonetheless, by a supreme effort of will, he went to the bedroom window, opened it, flashed his light out on the fire escape. With the exception of a stray cat that snarled at him and bounded down to the next landing, the rusty iron framework was bare, as was the courtyard.

Back to the front door they went, examining chain, lock and outside for any sign of forcible entry. Not

a scratch marred the black expanse of paint. Negative, Di Napoli thought. Nothing. Just another hysterical female living alone in New York, hearing things that aren't there.

To Susan Levenger, he said, "Well, whoever or whatever it was you heard is gone now. We'll be around this way again in a couple of hours and we'll check the neighborhood. Meanwhile, keep your door locked and chained. That's about all we can do for the moment. Sorry we couldn't be more helpful, but even we aren't magicians. Good night."

The girl managed a wan smile, as if Di Napoli's smoothly professional front didn't reassure her at all.

"Thanks anyhow, officers. I'm sure it wasn't my imagination. I know I heard *something*."

She suddenly wheeled to face Callaghan. "What did you say your name was?"

The young Irishman almost fainted. She had noticed him! "Callaghan," he stammered. "Dan Callaghan. Shield seventy, twenty-four, nine. If you ever need me, call on me." He knew he sounded fatuous, but could think of nothing better to say.

"I'll remember, and I may do just that." She appeared to have completely recovered from her fright. Her green eyes were almost twinkling now as she murmured a final "So long," framed her face

momentarily in the narrowing aperture of the closing door and was then lost from view.

Behind the wheel of the cruiser again, Di Napoli grunted, "Waste of time, Dan. No signs of forcible entry or even an attempt. Typical skitterish female, I guess. Hate to make a report out on the thing."

Callaghan showed no evidence of having heard. "Carm, did you see that hair? And those eyes? And that figure? By Holy Saint Ann and all the angels, she's the most beautiful girl I've ever laid eyes on! She asked me my name, too! Why, Carm?"

"Probably because she wanted to find out for herself that you were capable of speaking the English language. You sure looked like the village idiot, standing there with your mouth hanging open and your eyes bugged like a squashed frog. Is it possible for one man to get it so bad so quick? You might as well have held up a sign, you big dope."

"Yeah, I guess so," Callaghan mused dreamily. "You, Carm Di Napoli, were just looking at the future Mrs. Daniel Callaghan."

"Eventually, you'll have to let her in on your little secret," observed Di Napoli drily. "Which, knowing your shyness around women, I doubt. Well, rotsa ruck."

The next week was routine. Di Napoli and Callaghan continued on the midnight-to-eight, taking their share of calls—obstetrical

case, domestic quarrel, narcotics arrest, street gang rumble—but never becoming involved in anything major.

Seven nights later, on the following Thursday, the two were idling along Broadway. At 3:30 A.M., with only three scrambles, it had been a quiet tour. Di Napoli was reaching for a cigarette out of the pack on the dashboard when Sergeant Pekarski's metallic voice filled the front seat.

"Unit Seven-Three-Nine. Unit Seven-Three-Nine. Investigate possible prowler at Broadway and Nine-Three." The address and apartment number followed.

Callaghan sat up suddenly. "What the hell, Carm! That's Susan Levenger again! Step on it!"

The prospect of seeing the green-eyed girl with whom he had so precipitously fallen in love a week previous sent Callaghan into a glorious mood of expectation. Nonetheless, he admitted, his ardor was somewhat dampened by a sobering thought. Another false alarm? A second ghost prowler? Could his partner be right in his analysis of the beauteous Miss Levenger as a "typical skitterish female?"

They pounded up the front stairs of the building, knocked at 1-J.

A different Susan Levenger met them, one angry rather than frightened. "It took you long enough to get here," she snapped without

preamble. "Am I going to be terrorized forever?"

"Okay, okay," said Di Napoli patiently. "What now?"

She stared over at Callaghan for a second. "About the same as before, with one exception. I distinctly heard the door open, the chain grind against it, then quickly close again. So whoever it was *did* have a key."

"But you told us—"

"I recall that." She gnawed her lip in vexation. "No one has any but me and the super, and he's away tonight as usual. I don't know, Officer Di Napoli. There's no logical, sane way of explaining it. But then, that's your job, isn't it?"

"So the taxpayers seem to think," the older cop sighed. "And I presume you're one of them. Well, let's take another look around, although I doubt we'll find anything."

Di Napoli's hunch proved eminently correct. There was nothing out of place, suspicious or menacing about Susan Levenger's apartment. In five minutes, they were once more standing outside.

Di Napoli shut his notebook with a snap. "Miss Levenger, you are a lovely young lady and probably a smart one. You may have heard something and then again you may not. This makes two Thursday nights in a row you've called the dispatcher to report a prowler. So far, our investigation

has come up with a big, fat zero, which is exactly what we'll report.

"In the future, will you please make sure the guy waits until we get here? I'm not trying to be tough on you, but just bear in mind the tale of the little boy who hollered wolf. The third yell, nobody came, and he was eaten up. Good night to you, Miss Levenger."

She stood there a moment, fuming, opened her mouth as if to rebut Di Napoli's gentle lecture, then stamped her foot and slammed the door hard enough to rattle the building.

"What could I tell her?" Di Napoli said defensively as they hit the sidewalk. "Nothing plus nothing is still nothing. All right, she could be telling the truth. But—" He looked sideways at Callaghan. "Hey, Dan, what the hell's eating you?"

"I don't know. I've got a thing running around in my brain and I can't catch it. It ties in some way with Susan and her phantom prowler, but how I don't know. It looks like a pattern, Carm. Successive Thursday nights, as if someone was only interested in breaking in on that specific day of the week. But for God's sweet sake, why?"

"Ah, come on, Dan, you're reaching. Just because it's Miss Levenger you think she's the gal who turns the sun on and off for you. Thursday, Tuesday, Sunday, so what? She beefs to Pekarski, we

arrive and find zilch. That's it, and that's all it'll ever be."

Callaghan shook his head, remaining silent. Back in the cruiser, he slumped in the right side seat, chain smoked, stared straight ahead, and responded to Di Napoli's probing attempts at communication with distant grunts. All in all, the older man thought, it was one of the loneliest tours he had ever stood.

Callaghan checked off duty at 8 A.M., subways home, ate breakfast with his mother, then went to bed. Like a great percentage of his fellow shift workers, he experienced difficulty sleeping days. After a half hour of fruitless tossing, turning and staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, he bethought himself of a Friday examination, the material covering which, he chided himself, he should give at least some cursory attention if he expected to pass.

He opened the thick, loose-leaf book containing his lecture notes. A jumble of handwritten data leaped at him: "*LIMITATIONS, STATUTE OF*. Definite period of fixed time in which a legal action may be initiated. Litigant loses right of action otherwise. For prec. see *Underwood vs. Mayberry*, 1921, 119 N.Y. 12. Action upon a sealed instrument, 20 yrs. On contract, 6 yrs. Recovery of damages for libel, 2 yrs. Felony (except murder) 5 yrs. Murder not applicable. In criminal actions,

statute runs from time crime committed."

Callaghan read and re-read, but simply could not memorize. The numbers kept blurring, merging, coalescing; yet no matter how they moved, they formed themselves into Susan Levenger's face and figure. You great, blithering booby, Callaghan, he thought. First you can't sleep, now you can't even study, all because of a girl you just met and find it impossible to forget!

He turned to the next page. It was headed: "*EVIDENCE, CORROBORATIVE, RULES OF*. In criminal felony action, defendant cannot be convicted on unsupported testimony of accomplice alone. For prec., see *People vs. Mulholland*, 1959, 207 N.Y. 11. Jewel thief, E. Mulholland, freed by Judge Anthony Lewin when D.A. failed to produce evidence other than testimony of partner in Van Arsdale gem robbery. Re crim. trials, rules of evidence follow the common law as interpreted by the Federal courts and modified from time to time by Federal statutes."

Three attempts at ingesting that short piece of information resulted in a complete blank. His mind was too cluttered with red hair, green eyes, silk robe and dainty mules, flawless anatomy and delightfully feminine aroma. All those items, plus an annoying something that gnawed at the edges of his mind

in the manner of a mouse sampling a piece of cheddar.

At length, with a blasphemous oath, he knew he ultimately would have to confess to Father Del Vecchio come Sunday, Callaghan flung the note book from him. It was useless, hopeless. Nobody could study handicapped by the emotional conflicts besetting him! He buried his head under the pillow, and, an hour later, fell into a troubled, restless sleep.

It wasn't until nearly two in the afternoon that Dan finally caught sight of his elusive fact through a small opening in the fog of trivia obscuring his brain.

He sat bolt upright in bed, snapped his fingers, said excitedly, "Of course! How could I have been so dumb?" He threw back the covers, quickly showered and shaved, dressed in civvies, then performed a series of seemingly unrelated acts.

First, Callaghan plowed carefully through certain passages in two of his law books. Next, downtown, he requested that a package be pulled at *Records and Identification*. When it was, he studied it for some time, abstracted the fingerprint chart, returned the remainder of the file to its custodian. Last, equipped with powdered graphite and brush, he hailed a taxi (shuddering inwardly at the expense but recognizing the necessity for speed), and was driven to Susan Levenger's.

There he busied himself for the better part of an hour. This done, whistling an off-key version of "Dear Old Donegal," he entered a public phone booth, called the young lady herself at work, and engaged her in earnest conversation for twenty minutes.

The following Thursday night, starting his forty-eight hour swing, Dan Callaghan sat in Susan's darkened living room, consulting the luminous face of his watch for perhaps the tenth time. Was it possible the hands, swimming in a sea of molasses, read only 12:20 A.M.? Alone in the apartment, in accordance with the instructions he had given its occupant, Callaghan strained his ears, alert to catch even the slightest sound that might be construed as alien. Nothing except his own breathing disturbed the gloomy stillness.

On the fourth hour of his vigil, his lids grew heavy, as if an unseen hand were forcing them down over his eyes.

He fought the tendency, bringing his head abruptly up; then, despite his efforts, he fell into a deep sleep.

Cursing himself for an incompetent fool, he snapped instantaneously awake, mind and senses active, fully oriented. The sound that had ripped apart the thin fabric of his sleep was repeated now from the door. Gentle click of key being turned in lock. Pause. Scraping as the door was pushed



tentatively inward. Almost imperceptible jangle of chain. Flashlight in gloved hand, momentarily flickering, quickly extinguished. Whisper of shoe soles along the rug.

Silently, Callaghan inched himself away from the chair, picked up the beam of the light again on its way toward the kitchen. He watched in fascination as the shadowy figure holding it knelt down, laid the torch on the linoleum floor, probed around for a while, produced a peculiarly curved knife and began cutting.

At length, a square was lifted

out, followed by a section of board. Black-covered fingers dipped into the opening thus provided, emerged with a dusty canvas sack that shone briefly yellow in the dim glow of the intruder's light. There came to Callaghan's ears a low, short chuckle of triumph. The man started to rise from his kneeling position.

Callaghan had heard and seen enough. .38 Police Special in one hand, with the other he found the wall switch, flooding the tiny kitchen with glaring fluorescence.

The visitor to Susan Levenger's flat whirled around, his pinched,

sallow face a twisted panorama of surprise and rage.

"Hold it right there, Eddie Mulholland," Callaghan said, voice hard. "And take it easy with the Van Arsdale diamonds. I don't imagine the insurance company will want either the brooch or necklace in ten pieces."

The young cop's prisoner reacted with almost feline swiftness. In the act of raising his arms, he suddenly flung the sack of jewelry with uncanny accuracy directly at Callaghan's gun hand, following up the impromptu projectile with a leap of his own.

Callaghan had time to fire one shot, wild despite the cramped confines of the room, before Mulholland was on him, kneeing, biting, punching, a maniacal bundle of active hostility, triggered by his sick rage at being caught.

Callaghan had youth and weight on his side, the other desperation plus at least a rudimentary knowledge of judo. The gun was jarred from his grasp, kicked away to the opposite end of the kitchen. It was man to man and hand to hand after that, a grunting, breath-whistling, savage, no-quarter duel. Callaghan took a rigid finger to Mulholland's Adam's apple that drove the wind from him, retaliated with a right chop to the jaw and a dandy left hook which slammed Mulholland against a cabinet.

They came at each other again,

in close, ricocheting off walls, upsetting cans of flour and coffee, knocking over glassware, rolling around in the debris, two animals each in the full knowledge only one would survive.

At last, battered, bleeding, a swarm of angry hornets buzzing inside his head, Callaghan realized it had to be then or never. He pressed the attack, taking extra blows in order to land his own. He beat down Mulholland's flagging efforts to defend himself, planted a tattoo of rights and lefts in the other man's face. Little by little, Mulholland began to sag, until at the end Callaghan was holding him up in order to hit him.

Callaghan let go. His prisoner slid slowly down the wall to a sitting position, head lolling, out cold. A spent and weary officer slumped to his knees, barely hearing the wail of sirens, the banging of the front door, the voices, before he drew the first blank of his life.

DAN CALLAGHAN reoriented himself slowly, trying to place in focus the faces around him. The first he saw was Susan Levenger's, eyes shining, smiling, compassionate. He thought it the most splendid sight he had ever seen. Carm Di Napoli was there, too, in the living room; Lieutenant Driscoll and Captain Trask; uniformed officers; plainclothes detectives; reporters from the morning papers; Doc Peach, the police surgeon,

who was doing things to his head that hurt.

"I ought to brain you myself, for trying to be a hero, except that results count, and anyway, Mulholland seems to have done a pretty good job already. And in case any of you newshounds are wondering, there's a good chance this eager beaver is a third grade detective before he reports for his next tour. I hear the Commissioner's in a very grateful mood."

Callaghan lifted his head in wonderment. Third grade detective! More money, which meant a chance to finish college more quickly! Was it possible? He decided it was.

"And of course I'd like to have a piece of you on my own," Carm Di Napoli chimed in. "You couldn't even let your old buddy from Seven-Three-Nine in on this caper, could you? It's a damn good thing you managed to get off one shot at least. Neighbors heard it and called the precinct. If they hadn't, Mulholland might awakened before you and scrambled. Then where'd you have been?"

"Okay, Carm, he didn't," said Callaghan wearily. "Don't sweat it."

Walt Briscoe, a reporter from *The News*, materialized at Callaghan's side, pencil poised over a sheaf of copy paper.

"What's the story, Dan? It's a big one, and we want all the facts. Van Arsdale rocks recovered after

better'n five years, Eddie Mulholland on ice for keeps, and you're the boy with the answers. How'd you dope it out? Give, willya? The late A.M. won't wait forever."

Men from the *Trib* and *Times* also bustled around, firing questions all at once.

"Okay, boys, okay. Just don't crowd me. Give me a minute to sort it out in some kind of order."

He thought for a moment. "It started two weeks ago, when Carm and I got the first call to investigate a possible prowler. Miss Levenger over there was certain somebody was trying to get in, not forcibly, mind you, but with a key. We found nothing. Again last Thursday night, only that time she claimed she had heard a key actually turning in the lock. Still negative.

"When we left on the second occasion, something stirred in my mind, but I wasn't able to chase it down. It related to the pattern, the M.O. of the guy trying to enter this place. At first, we didn't even think there was one, and how wrong can two cops be?

"All I knew definitely was that the attempts were made *only* on Thursday nights, when the super was absent, and almost certainly with a key, which strained credulity because there weren't any extra ones to Miss Levenger's knowledge. There were four other facts whirling separately, which might as well have been Swahili as far as

I was concerned, until I managed to tie them together. That didn't happen until yesterday afternoon.

"As most of you know, I go to Fordham Law school at night. A week back, I was making a stab at reviewing for an exam. We'd been studying sections dealing with the statute of limitations and courtroom evidence. The latter even cited *People vs. Mulholland*, nineteen fifty-nine, two-o-seven, N.Y. eleven, just as I took it down at the lecture, but my mind was so preoccupied then with—ah—other matters it didn't sink in. Those were two of the facts.

"Another was a mug shot of Eddie Mulholland I'd seen a year ago, when he was wanted in for questioning in connection with that jewel heist on West Seventy-ninth. The fourth escaped me completely for a hell of a long time."

Doc Peach slapped a final piece of tape over the bandage covering part of Callaghan's head, stepped back to admire his handiwork.

"I guess that'll do, Dan. You've got a skull like Mount Rushmore. Ideal for a lawyer or a cop."

"Thanks, O Healer," Callaghan said with a grin. "I'll live." He shot a glance at Susan Levenger. "I have an added incentive now."

"If you want this story in the morning editions," Briscoe broke in crossly, "you'd better get with it. Either that, or leave it for the *Journal* and *Telegram*. Which my editor ain't going to like."

"Well, to continue. The clincher was merely my memory, or previous lack of it. When I saw Mulholland's mug shot and rap sheet a year ago, *it gave his last known address, in nineteen sixty, as this apartment*. After that bit hit me, the rest all kind of shuffled into place, or at least I felt sure it would if I gave it a chance.

"In August of nineteen fifty-nine, Mulholland was arrested and tried for collaborating with Mannie Garms in the Van Arsdale diamond robbery. Matter of fact, Garms fingered him in court, but the D.A. was never able to produce any independent witnesses, and under the law, a criminal can't be convicted on the unsupported testimony of an accomplice alone. Because of that, Garms went to the pen for a ten-year jolt, while Mulholland got off scot-free. The jewels were never recovered, the case was marked closed. At least, that's what everybody thought.

"Mulholland, however, had different ideas. He's a jewel thief, yes, but a smart one. He waited until the five-year statute of limitations ran out before he tried to pick up the gems he had stashed in what is now Susan Levenger's apartment, *but which used to be his before she moved in*. In that way, even if further evidence were somehow produced tying him to the robbery, apart from Garms' old testimony, he could never be

prosecuted for it, since the statute of limitations had already expired.

"He cased the place, found the super went to Brooklyn Thursday nights, and twice made his move with a key he had kept. Once Miss Levenger was still awake and scared him away, the second time he was stopped by the inside chain lock.

"When I finally doped it all out, I still had to convince myself I was right. So, I pulled Mulholland's package from R and I, then ran a fingerprint check myself on the door and knob of this apartment. Sure enough, I found two of Ed-die's prints, big as life.

"After that, I called Miss Levenger, explained the setup in detail, convinced her she'd be doing herself and the taxpayers a public service if she went to a girl friend's house *this Thursday night*, allowing me to stay here in her stead, leave the chain lock off and wait for Mulholland to appear. I'd have bet a month's pay on what he wanted, but if I hadn't given him enough opportunity to uncover the diamonds himself we might never have found them.

"He's still clean as far as the law's concerned on the Van Arsdale heist, for the reasons I outlined, which doesn't really matter, because he overlooked a few small items like breaking and entering, assault on a police officer and possession of stolen goods. This'll be his third fall, so I'd imagine he

isn't making any plans for the next twenty years or so.

"That's about all there is to it, boys. For once in my life, I got lucky, and even then I almost blew it. Now run find some phones somewhere."

The reporters scurried out. Dan Callaghan lay back on the sofa, feeling tired, sore, drained.

Lieutenant Driscoll pushed his hat to the back of his head.

"It isn't *quite* all, Callaghan. There's a five thousand dollar reward from Continental Fidelity and Casualty for the recovery of the Van Arsdale diamonds. And cheap at the price, considering that they laid out nearly two hundred thousand to settle the claim."

Callaghan's weary mind assimilated this new information. Was all this really happening to him? A lifetime of surprises had been compressed into a thin slice of one night. It was a wonderful experience, akin to throwing naturals in a crap game.

"Could a man get married if he had five grand to start with?" he asked no one in particular.

"Wouldn't surprise me," said Di Napoli drily. "I was bringing home less than fifty a week when I took the plunge."

One small forward-going step remained, Callaghan thought. Shy and awkward around girls though he considered himself to be, he knew he had to make the effort or die on the spot.

He cleared his throat. "Miss Levenger, I'm still off duty today and tonight. I'm sure my head would get well even faster if we could have dinner and maybe go to a movie around seven o'clock this evening. Do you think that could be arranged?"

Her smile was a rapturous splash of red and white, the warmth shining out of her green eyes a forerunner of spring after a bitter winter.

"Strange you should ask me that, Mr. Callaghan," she replied "It just so happens this is the cook's night out, and I didn't feel like warming up a TV dinner or opening a can of soup. Seven will be fine. And don't be late; it's a habit you and Officer Di Napoli seem to have."

Afterwards, in the cruiser detailed to drive them home, Sergeant Pekarski's voice boomed over the radio.

"Attention, Unit Eight-Two-Two. Orders for Patrolman Daniel Callaghan from the captain. At his earliest convenience, he is to investigate Ott's Jewelry Store at Broadway and Eight-Six. Possible purchase of wedding ring. That is all."

"Ten-four," Dan Callaghan said softly into the mike, snapping it off and leaning back in the seat.

News traveled fast in the Twenty-Fourth!

His precinct. And, by the grace of God, Susan Levenger's.

Callaghan dozed, dreaming rosily of the future, as the car shot uptown.



NEXT MONTH

DARLING, YOU DESERVE ME

A Gripping Novelet

By **FLETCHER FLORA**

*He was everything a woman could want in a man.
Everything—and maybe a little bit more. Three
dead women could have warned her about that!*

DEATH OF A DREAM

*His wife was too fat, his bankroll too slender.
It was high time to do something about both.*

by JAMES HOLDING



WHEN HILDA inherited a thousand shares of Intercontinental stock from this great-uncle of hers, I knew that it was my big chance.

For I was sick of Hilda—deathly sick—after being married to her for seven years. I wanted to get away from her tiresome adoration of me, from her emptyheaded chatter, from the distasteful necessity of watching her grow ever fatter and dowdier.

I wanted desperately, too, to escape from my dull job in the bank, where I was stuck in a junior executive rut that I knew would never lead to a future worthy of my capabilities.

You can see why I welcomed Hilda's legacy.

Fortunately, Hilda was unbelievably naive about money matters, even though I worked in a bank. You'd have thought that a little money sense would have rubbed off on her, just listening to my dinner table conversation for seven years. But no. Hilda remained wide-eyed and innocent about all things financial, right up to the end. It wasn't because she thought money slightly degrading, as many do. It was just because she was naturally stupid.

Her face and figure had been superb when I married her. That's what had attracted me to her. But

inside that pretty, boring little head of hers, I soon discovered, there wasn't room for anything but a simple dog-like devotion to me and a few very commonplace thoughts about clothes, movies, television programs and country cooking. And her beautiful figure began to disappear under layers of fat within a year of our wedding.

Anyway, the day we received the stock certificate from the Chicago lawyers who were settling Hilda's great-uncle's estate, I dropped into Jamie's Bar on the way home from the bank. When I got home, Hilda kissed me at the door.

"Why, you've been drinking, Chester," she said in a rallying tone.

"A quick one in Jamie's Bar on my way home," I said, "to celebrate your legacy."

"Oh," Hilda said with her noble, forgiving air, "that's nice. Now come to dinner, dear. It's ready. Ham and cabbage."

You see? Ham and cabbage! When every nerve in my bored body was crying out for caviar, beef stroganoff and champagne under a purple sky with a beautiful slender woman!

Dissembling, I said, "Oh, good! But let's see that stock certificate you told me came in the mail today."

She got an envelope off the TV cabinet for me.

"Here it is," she said. "And

goodness! Look at all the postage!"

"It's registered mail, that's why. And rightly so, Hilda. Do you realize this piece of paper is worth over a hundred thousand dollars?"

"Really?" Hilda said. "How nice! I think it was dear of Uncle Lew to leave it to me, don't you?"

"Very generous and thoughtful, yes." I opened the certificate, made out on its face to Mrs. Hilda Carstairs. "Of course, it's a growth stock. Intercontinental doesn't pay any dividends yet. But it's nice to have it, certainly." I pointed to the endorsement line on the back. "You'd better sign it right now, dear. Then everything will be legal and the transaction will be completed."

"Sign it? Of course. I should have known. What for?" She took the fountain pen I handed her and signed her name on the back of the certificate.

"That's your receipt signature," I told her blandly. "The stock certificate isn't good without your signature on the back. Once you've signed it, they know the stock really belongs to you." I folded up the certificate and shoved it carelessly into my pocket.

"I'll put it in our safe deposit box at the bank," I said.

She nodded without much interest.

"The ham and cabbage will be getting cold," she said. "Let's eat now, dear."

Somehow the ham and cabbage

tasted better that night than ever before.

I waited for several months, assuaging my natural impatience as best I could. Then, on my lunch hour one day, I got Hilda's stock certificate out of my safe deposit box and drove out to a suburban branch of The Farmer's Bank, a competitor of my own bank. I happened to know one of the tellers there, a fellow named Hogarth. I'd sat beside him at a Bankers' Association dinner one time, and we'd been speaking acquaintances ever since.

I went directly to the branch manager's desk and introduced myself. Then I said matter-of-factly, "I'd like to borrow seventy thousand dollars, Mr. Norbit," reading his name off the plate on his desk.

He raised his eyebrows, exactly as a banker is commonly supposed to do on hearing such words.

"That's quite a big loan, Mr. Carstairs," he said non-committally. He looked at me, sensibly awaiting further information.

"I'm conscious of that. I'm prepared to put up excellent collateral, however. One thousand shares of Intercontinental. I have it right here."

Mr. Norbit's face cleared immediately. His sharp eyes followed my hand into my jacket pocket. When it came out holding Hilda's stock certificate, he said expansively, "Ah, that's a very sound company, Mr. Carstairs. A very sound

security. But apt to be volatile, you know."

He opened a copy of the Wall Street Journal on his desk and took a quick look at yesterday's closing prices.

"Closed at 104 last night," he murmured. "I'm afraid, though, we can't let you have seventy thousand on it, Mr. Carstairs. The market is currently rather unsettled. And the stock *is* volatile, subject to big swings. We have to be well-covered on a loan of this size, you know."

"I understand it," I said. "I'm a banker myself."

"Really?" He was surprised.

"Yes. I'm applying to you for the loan instead of my own bank because I don't want everybody at my place to know my private and personal business."

"Wait a minute." Norbit picked up his telephone and called his headquarters office. "What's the limit I can lend on a thousand shares of Intercontinental?" he asked somebody there. The home office man said something and Norbit hung up. He said to me, "We can't let you have more than sixty-five."

I said, deadpan, "That'll have to do, then." It was more than I'd hoped. "I'm in a hurry for the money. I've got this very promising investment opportunity in a new business—" I told him about it in detail.

"Fine," he said. "I'll have the

note drawn up. Six percent all right?"

"Sure. And ninety days."

He nodded and held out his hand for the stock certificate. I gave it to him. He turned it over, saw that Hilda had signed it, but looked doubtful. "I'm sure you'll understand," he said then, "but on a loan of this size, we have to be very careful. Is this Hilda Carstairs, to whom the stock is registered, your wife?"

"Yes."

"And she's willing to pledge her stock for this loan?"

"She endorsed the certificate, didn't she? It's negotiable."

"True. But we can't be sure she endorsed it willingly, can we?"

"For Heaven's sake!" I pretended indignation. "You know I'm Chester Carstairs."

"Not for sure," he interrupted apologetically.

"Call your teller, Mr. Hogarth. He knows me. He knows I'm married, too."

Mr. Norbit, without embarrassment, did exactly that. Hogarth identified me at once and vouched for me.

After all, a member of the Bankers' Association—

When Hogarth left, I said to Norbit, "You want me to get Hilda to sign a specific permission form for you?"

I was still pretending hurt at his lack of confidence in me. But I could have got Hilda to sign one if

he'd wanted it. She wouldn't know it from a laundry receipt.

"That won't be necessary," he said with dignity. "How do you want the money?"

"I'll open a checking account with you, and you can pay the sixty-five thousand into it. Okay?"

"Good. Then we'll just charge your account with the monthly interest on the loan."

And so it was arranged. I signed the note for the loan, left Hilda's stock certificate with Norbit, and opened a new account with the Farmer's Bank, into which the sixty-five thousand was to be paid next day.

A week later, I went down into the safe deposit vault in my own bank on my lunch hour. I signed the admission card, gave my box key to Charlie, the custodian, and went with him to my box location. While he was withdrawing my box from the metallic ranks of others in section C, I ostentatiously lighted a cigarette and said, "I guess I'll use a booth this time, Charlie. I've got to go through my box."

"Okay, Mr. Carstairs," said Charlie. "How about Booth four here?"

"Swell," I said, blowing cigarette smoke. I entered the booth with my safety deposit box. "Thanks, Charlie." He closed the door of the booth behind me and left me to myself.

I put my cigarette down on the edge of the booth table, flipped

both ends of my deposit box open and rummaged its entire contents out on the table top. There was nothing of much importance there. I had no stocks or bonds, no cash stashed away. There was the house lease, a small insurance policy (lapsed), birth certificates for Hilda and me, the passports we'd used on our Caribbean honeymoon (expired) a silver medal I'd won in the high jump at a high school track meet, and a ragged bundle of old income tax records that went back to our first joint return.

I set the bundle of income tax records near the edge of the table, right up against my neglected cigarette's end. Then I patiently blew on the cigarette coal until the papers caught a spark from it, glowed briefly, then emitted a tongue of flame. I let the income tax papers get well alight, fanning smoke over the booth's half-door into the vault outside.

I dumped my other papers on top of the burning tax records, waiting until they were flaming merrily, then cursed at the top of my voice and yelled, "Charlie! Hey, Charlie! Fire!" I began beating at the burning papers with my hands.

Charlie had seen the smoke, because just as I yelled, he arrived with a small fire extinguisher. I had the fire out by then, and was regarding the charred remains of my valuable papers with dismay when he pulled the half-door open.



"What happened?" he asked in a flustered voice.

"Cigarette caught the stuff on fire." A rueful glance at my slightly burned hands seemed indicated here.

"Tough," Charlie said. "But I'm glad you weren't burned seriously, Mr. Carstairs." He took in the charred papers. "Anything valuable burn up?"

"Nothing I can't replace. Nothing even very important, except for a stock certificate that belongs to my wife. Serves me right for being careless. Glad I didn't set the bank on fire. Whew! I was scared there for a minute!"

"Me, too," agreed Charlie with emphasis. "Boy!"

That night, between reluctant mouthfuls of Hilda's macaroni casserole, I told her about my accidental fire.

"Oh, Chester darling!" she cried with characteristic disregard of the really important issue. "You might have been badly burned!"

"True," I said, "but I wasn't. A couple of little blisters. What did get burned up was that stock your uncle left you."

"Too bad," said Hilda, clicking her tongue. "But we can get along without it all right. We did before."

I broke the news to her. "We didn't actually lose the money, of course. We can get a new stock certificate to replace the burned one, Hilda. There'll be a lot of red tape to go through, that's all."

"What will we have to do?"

"You'll have to write Intercontinental and tell them your certificate has been destroyed by fire and you want a new one. They'll send you a form to fill out applying for an indemnity bond. You submit the form, with a statement of the facts as to how the original certificate was destroyed, to a surety company. For a price, the surety

company will issue you a bond of indemnity covering the face amount of your original stock certificate. Then you'll get a new stock certificate to replace the old one."

"Goodness!" Hilda said, bewildered. "What's a bond of indemnity?"

See what I mean about Hilda? A complete blank about money matters.

In the following weeks, however, she went through all the red tape I'd described, and finally was qualified to be issued a new certificate for her thousand shares of Intercontinental. I had to guide her every step of the way, of course. Luckily, she was very incurious about the whole thing.

She never even questioned where I'd found the six thousand dollar premium to pay for her bond of indemnity. Actually it was the first check I'd drawn on my new sixty-five thousand dollar account at the Farmers' Bank.

Well, when Hilda's new stock certificate arrived, I pulled my fountain pen out of my pocket once more and said, "Has to be signed, Hilda. Remember?"

"Oh, yes. My receipt signature. Isn't that what you said?" She scrawled her name carelessly on the endorsement line.

The next morning, as soon as the market opened, I sold Hilda's thousand shares of Intercontinental through the brokerage office in my own bank building where I

was known, turning over her new certificate to the broker. The stock brought 105 dollars a share. This, less brokerage fees and commissions, meant a net profit to me of over a hundred thousand dollars. I told the broker to deliver his check for the amount to me at my office.

I got the check on Monday morning, April second. I remember the date very well. I used my lunch hour to drive out to the Farmers' Bank branch where I had my new account. I told Mr. Norbit, the manager, that I was going to deposit my broker's check in my account there, that I had liquidated some other holdings of mine in order to add to my capital for the investment venture I'd described to him.

"What I'd like is a cashier's check for the whole thing, Mr. Norbit—this hundred thousand and the total of my account here—as evidence of absolutely certified funds to use as a bargaining factor in my negotiations with my future colleagues. I'd leave enough in my account to cover my interest payments on your loan, of course."

Norbit nodded. "We'll have to wait till this large check clears," he warned me, but it was just routine. He thought I was a real operator now.

"I'll come by and pick up your cashier's check for the entire amount on Wednesday morning. How'll that be?"

He nodded again.

On Wednesday morning, when I left for the office, it was with an overnight bag in my hand containing the minimum clothing and equipment for a flight to Brazil. That's where I intended to go to find my caviar, champagne and slender women. I had a confirmed Pan-American Jet reservation on the one-thirty flight to Rio, made two weeks previously. I'd told Hilda I was going out of town on bank business that afternoon for overnight. When I kissed her good-bye, it was with an overwhelming sense of relief that from now on, I'd never have to do it again, never have to pretend again to enjoy her silly ham and cabbage and macaroni casserole.

I worked calmly at the bank until the noon hour. Then I cashed a check on my account there that nearly cleaned it out, just for current expenses. Chicken feed to hold me until my cashier's check was comfortably cashed in Brazil.

I went out to the Farmers' Bank, picked up my cashier's check, stowed it in my wallet and left, thanking Mr. Norbit politely. I now had parlayed a small piece of engraved paper that didn't even belong to me into a hundred and sixty thousand dollars cash.

I drove to the airport, savoring my triumph, put the car in the parking lot and went into the waiting room. It was one-fifteen.

At one-twenty, they called my

flight. I rose from my secluded seat in the waiting room and started for the loading gate.

That's when I saw Hilda.

She was hurrying toward me from the entrance, a tentative smile on her face and a tall, yellow-eyed man in tow.

She came up to me and said happily, "Chester!" She drew the tall man forward by an arm. "This is my husband, Chester Carstairs," she introduced us. "And this is Lieutenant Randall from the Detective Bureau, darling."

My heart sank in my chest like a wobbly duck in a downdraft. "Detective!" was all I could get out.

Hilda nodded brightly. "Lieutenant Randall wants to arrest you, darling," she said. "Mr. Norbit and I asked him to."

Randall put a firm hand on my arm. I was stunned, completely at a loss. But one thing was sure: I was done for. I could never explain away the duplicate stock certificates.

In the police car, on the way into town, I said to Lieutenant Randall, "How did Norbit get wise, will you please tell me that?" I felt put upon and indignant.

It was Hilda who answered my question. "Oh, Mr. Norbit didn't guess for a minute anything was wrong, Chester. Not until I telephoned him."

I couldn't believe it. She was a moron about money. "How did

you happen to call Mr. Norbit? You never heard of the man!"

"That's right, darling. Not until this morning. Not until that funny thing came in the mail."

"What funny thing?"

"That bank statement, or whatever you call it. From the wrong bank, Chester. Don't you see?"

Gloomily I reflected that it's the little routine details that trip you up every time. I'd forgotten about monthly bank statements. Me—a banker. I croaked, "The wrong bank?"

"Of course. You work at the First National, silly. I know that much. And our only bank account has been there, naturally. But this morning you got a statement from the Farmers' Bank. I thought it was a mistake, so I opened it. And you know what, darling? It showed that a Chester Carstairs at our address had more than a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in an account there!" Hilda gulped. "I knew very well you couldn't have as much money as that! You're always telling me I have to skimp. So I was sure it was a mistake. I just simply called the Farmers' Bank and told them so."

"And you talked to Mr. Norbit, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, and he was very nice. When I told him who I was, he said, 'Oh, the lady whose Inter-continental stock we're holding as security for some loan we made your husband.'"

"And then you told him it couldn't be your stock, because it had burned up and you'd just received a new certificate?"

"Well, I didn't understand why he wanted to know, but I couldn't just politely refuse to tell him, could I?"

"No, I suppose not," I said wearily.

"Especially," went on Hilda, "when he told me you were probably leaving the country right that minute with my money and his, too, and not even taking me with you!"

In a weary, injured tone I said, "And you believed him? You'd really think that—"

"I thought it was a possibility, Chester," she said defensively, "because one of the cancelled checks that came with that bank statement this morning was made out to Pan-American Airways. And it seemed like a lot too much money to pay for the little short trip you'd told me you were taking

today. So when I told Mr. Norbit about that—"

"That's enough, Hilda," I said. "Don't go on." I lapsed into miserable silence. Lieutenant Randall looked at me and grinned.

"Smart girl," he said, jerking his head toward Hilda.

Hilda was crying now.

"I didn't want you to leave me, Chester," she wailed. "I love you—you know that."

"So you betrayed me to the police?"

Hilda sniffled.

"Yes," she said solemnly. "This won't make any difference to me, Chester, I promise you. When you come out of prison, I'll be waiting for you."

I sighed and closed my eyes. Sadly I said farewell forever to my dream of caviar, champagne and slender girls. For me, there would never be anything but ham and cabbage, macaroni casserole, and fat Hilda.

If or when I ever get out.

COMING SOON—THESE CRIME FICTION HEADLINERS

HAL ELLSON

JAMES HOLDING

TALMAGE POWELL

JOHN JAKES

ARTHUR PORGES

C. B. GILFORD

JONATHAN CRAIG

THE SELF DEFENDER

by TALMAGE POWELL

She was a woman alone, fighting for her life. But she had a weapon working for her stronger even than a murder rap. And used it!

•

I, JOHN CONWAY of Conway, Conway, Heimer and Metz, was the natural choice as a defense attorney. She could afford the best, and



our families had moved in the same social circles for three generations. She was, after all, Ellen Rackway, nee Ellen Featherstone.

If her maiden name means nothing to you, that isn't my fault, dear fellow. It merely proves you are unacquainted with the financial pages and the social register.

Knowing her, I would have defended her if she couldn't have paid a dime. She was a young woman of spunk and determination. She was not afraid to watch the chips fall where they will. She believed in fair exchange, tooth for tooth. Her code included the rule of seeing anything through to its natural, proper, and inevitable end, and she had always lived up to her code.

Lest you jump to the conclusion that her emotional discipline was inhuman, let me hasten to add that in her lifetime she had committed one very human mistake.

She'd married Kevin Rackway.

A few hours after she became a widow, she was conversing with me at police headquarters. I'd naturally rushed over there the moment her phone call had apprised me of the dreadful turn of events.

Although she was in custody, the police were treating her with consideration. Money and prestige do count, you know. Have you ever heard of a millionaire who went to the electric chair?

I was shown into a small office normally occupied by a police cap-

tain. Ellen was brought in moments later. The matron retired discreetly, and although the room was guarded outside the exits by policemen, Ellen was afforded her full constitutional right to talk with her attorney in private.

She was lovely, with a healthy, sportswoman's figure, a forthrightly beautiful face, and a mane of glistening black hair.

"It was kind of you to come so quickly, John."

"I'm your godfather, remember," I said. "Now, tell me what this is all about."

"It's about Kevin, of course," she said.

"Ah, yes," I said as if an unpleasant odor had risen to my nostrils. "I believe you said on the phone that you're being held in connection with his death."

"A customary procedure, John, since I killed him."

"Ellen, really!"

"I not only killed him, but I reported it immediately to the police."

"You've admitted to them—"

"Certainly, John," she said calmly. "Why should I try to hide it? Wouldn't the facts inevitably come to light? Better to wash this bit of linen in public and have done with it."

I was unable to match her calm. I sank to the edge of a chair and drew a deliberately slow breath to regain my composure.

Ellen patted me gently on the

shoulder. "I'm very sorry to put you through this, John."

"Oh, no! Not at all, my dear. But remember one thing. A client should never speak except through her lawyer."

"I won't forget, John. But in this instance, it was best this way. You'll see."

"I think there is much for me to see. I know none of the details. When did Kevin die?"

"This morning. Shortly before noon."

"What was the cause of his death, my dear?"

"I struck him on the head."

"Dear me! With what sort of instrument?"

"A fireplace poker. A rather heavy one."

"Dear, dear me! Where did this action take place?"

"At my private lodge on the lake."

"I see," I said. "When did you and Kevin go up there?"

"We didn't. At least not together. I went up yesterday afternoon. Kevin came this morning. He knew I was alone in the lodge. He came for one reason only. He came for the express purpose of killing me."

As she spoke, she seated herself quietly on a chair near mine. With the slight tilt of her head that was characteristic, she gave me a bit of a smile. "Is it all coming too rapidly for you, John?"

"I must admit there are blank spots."

"I'll try to fill in everything for you, John. You know that things were rocky between Kevin and me?"

"I didn't know, my dear."

"But you've heard rumors."

"I don't countenance idle gossip, especially about one who is so—"

"It wasn't all idle," she said quietly. "In fact, the gossip fell short of the truth. I'd come to despise Kevin."

I sighed. "I'd suspected as much," I admitted.

"I think it began before the honeymoon was over," she mused. "I knew I'd been played for a fool. It had all been an act with Kevin. He'd married me for one reason alone. My money."

Her brows pulled together slightly. "For my money . . . A tired, uninteresting phrase when applied to someone else. Quite another matter when you realize it's happened to you. It cuts where the pain is sharpest. It violates the sanctity and dignity of being a human being. To be married for one's money, not for one's self, is much more than merely being victimized, John. Even a common street-walker feels she is of some value, some necessity to a man. Not so the woman who is married for her money alone."

"The rotter!" I said. "To subject you, of all women, to such contemptible cruelty!"

"Kevin had barely begun," El-

len said. "Once he felt that he had a grip on my money, he ceased all pretense. He resumed his affair with Cricket Luden."

"Cricket Luden?"

"You wouldn't know her, of course. A tawdry young woman who shared Kevin's greed. Kevin and I had been married little more than a month when I suspected he was seeing another woman. I fol-



lowed him one evening. I saw him meet this vulgar little animal. I made discreet inquiries.

"Easily enough, I learned much about them. She wasn't a whim of the moment, someone he'd met recently. Their relationship went back for a considerable time. Everything between Kevin and me was but a means to get what they both wanted."

"Did you face Kevin with this knowledge?"

Ellen nodded. "He denied at first that he knew the girl, which made him all the more sickening, as far as I was concerned."

"But he did admit the truth?"

"Finally—arrogantly, viciously, vituperatively. As only Kevin could be."

"You should have come to me at that moment, my dear. You needed a lawyer."

"Kevin dared me to do so," she said. "He reminded me of community property laws and the legal entanglements the rich can get into when a marriage is dissolved."

"I see!" The coldness in my voice was meant for Kevin's memory. "He had you trapped."

"Yes."

"Unless you went to court with an iron-clad case of adultery—"

"They were smart. They played it very carefully, John."

"And any other grounds for divorce would have meant a large community property settlement."

"Yes," she said.

"You could have afforded it," I reminded her.

"No, I couldn't have. Not at all."

"You gave more than fifty thousand dollars to charity and college scholarship funds last year alone, Ellen."

"I shall give an equal or larger amount this year." She stopped speaking and studied me for several long seconds. Her eyes were dark and lonely. "Don't you understand the difference, John?"

"I think I do."

"I think you're trying to understand. But you can't really, because you aren't a woman. Only a woman could understand what

Kevin had done to me, what he was doing to me that night as he stood and told me sneeringly that I could buy my way out."

"Unjust," I agreed. "Horribly unjust."

Ellen said, "I went through hell, believe me. Then I decided that justice lay only in depriving him of the very thing that had motivated him, the thing he wanted more than anything else. If I'd been humiliated, I would humiliate in return. First, I stopped his charge accounts. *That* brought on a scene.

"But I stuck to my guns. Then I transferred funds and left him without a joint checking account. The scenes got rougher, but I didn't relent, even after he struck me with his fist one night."

"The abominable louse!" I said.

"He was a pauper surrounded by plenty. Everything he'd schemed to get was in sight, but not within his reach. He was reduced to the necessity of coming to me when he wanted money for a pair of trousers."

"Bully for you, Ellen!"

"In addition, Miss Cricket Lunden was becoming impatient, questioning the eventual success of Kevin's plot."

"Her ardor was cooling?" I asked.

Ellen nodded. "She had to go to work to maintain herself. It didn't set well at all. Kevin really wanted her, and he was driven to distraction. At last, the distraction be-

came desperation. He even threatened to filch objects of art from the estate and sell them. I told him to go right ahead. I'd have him jailed, since such items remain in my father's name.

"Kevin knew I would do exactly what I'd said. For the second time, he struck me. Quite a punch. In the stomach. A hard slapping about the face. I managed to undergo the torture with a laugh."

"Bravo!" I said.

"I told him that he'd made his bed and now he would lie in it. Quite alone. Quite penniless. No threat, no amount of torture would make me change my mind. He would never get his hands on my money until the day I died."

"Bravo and ole!" I said.

"The final change came to him then, John. I can't describe it definitely, not as you describe a color or a view of the seashore. Something in his face, behind his eyes, in his manner when he thought I was unaware that he was observing me."

"More scheming. A thicker plot," I said.

"Yes," she said, the first hint of tiredness in her voice. "I know that now. I knew it at the lake cottage. I told him yesterday that I believed I'd discovered a way to defeat him, to sever myself from him without a community property settlement.

"I drove up to the lake. I'd told the servants, and he learned my destination from them. Today he

came. He was prepared to kill me. He had it all figured out. He reviled me. He took delight in telling me how it would happen.

"He was going to make it look as if I'd suffered a fall in the cottage and died alone, without being able to summon medical attention. Miss Luden and a male friend were going to say that he'd been with them at the time of my death."

"The horror of it all!" I said.

"When he was all finished with his sadistic speech, Kevin advanced on me. I begged him to go away, to forget that such a dreadful thing had ever hatched in his mind. He said no, that he was going to kill me and take pleasure in doing it. I screamed as he reached for me, and I grabbed the poker beside the big fireplace there in the lodge. I—I struck him. He fell. He was dead."

I took Ellen's hand in both of mine. "You poor, poor girl."

"And so—" she expelled a shaky breath—"we are here."

"Yes," I said. "But perhaps not for long."

"Perhaps?"

"You were simply defending yourself," I said. "Any jury in the land would agree that in this case you were justified. It was a case of a lone woman at the mercy of a murderer. A woman faced with no choice but to try to keep herself from being killed. If we only—"

"If?" she said.

"A single witness."

A faint smile slipped across Ellen's lips. "How about a jury box full of witnesses? A courtroom full of witnesses?"

"I don't catch your meaning, my dear."

"I'm referring to the tape," she said. "When Kevin stopped his car outside the lodge, I was in the study off the main room, using the tape recorder to dictate some correspondence. I remember leaving the recorder on when I went into the other room to meet Kevin."

"It's a very expensive outfit, John, very sensitive, and the scene between Kevin and me took place noisily, as you can imagine. Everything he said to me, the whole of the scene, is in sound on that recorder. If the tape were played before a jury—"

"My dear," I literally shouted, "we'll have you out on bail in a matter of minutes. When we play that tape for the district attorney, I doubt that he'll even insist on the formality of a trial."

"Are you sure, John?"

"Certain. What a stroke of—" I glimpsed the depths of her eyes. She was also sure. As sure as I.

As if she divined my thoughts, she laughed softly and patted my cheek. "Of course I had to defend myself, John."

"Of course," I agreed. "No one can doubt that."

Not even, I added to myself mentally, if it did take you awhile to goad Kevin into it, my dear.

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*P*review

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THE HOWLING TEENAGERS AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

VIOLENT DEATH hung in the morning air.

It rose with the mist over the great river that flowed past the shining white new city. The rumble in the distance grew louder, a sound like an express train moving closer. The police and thin line of British-uniformed, American-armed troops were in their places around the perimeter of the airfield at the edge of the city in the morning sun.

The twin-engined aircraft circled the field once and prepared for the landing.

The distant rumble grew closer. The aircraft touched down. The morning mist began to burn off.

The police and soldiers lounged easily in their thin line, joked, pointed toward the approaching rumble that shook the ground, and laughed. They were not worried. This was Africa. The new Africa, but still Africa. The Zulus of Tcha-

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ka had roamed across this land, beating their *assegaïs* against their shields to frighten the enemy before they ever appeared to do battle with them.

The approaching mob was doing the same thing, and the police and soldiers were not frightened. They had been through this before. Only as a formality they held their weapons ready as the first of the mob advanced along the road from the city.

The twin-engined aircraft rolled to a stop and the door opened. A massive broad-shouldered man stepped out and stood at the head of the movable stairs. His white

teeth flashed in the morning sun. He was taller than the nervous men around him, like some great Zulu chief himself.

At the edge of the field the first wave of the mob made contact with the police and troops. The police and troops held them back, smiling but striking out with clubs and gun butts where necessary. The troops and police smiled, because they had suddenly seen that the entire mob was made up of the young, the teenagers of this emerging new nation.

The tall, broad-shouldered man stepped down the movable stairway and reached the field itself. He

started across, his bodyguards trotting to keep up with him.

"*Vive le Presidente!*" voices shouted.

Suddenly, the mob seemed twice its size. The police stopped smiling. The soldiers battled. Howling, the mob of teenagers smashed through the thin line of guards. Sirens wailed in the distance as reinforcements approached for the police.

The mob did not wait. Roaring like wild animals, screaming, hysterical, they poured over the line of guards.

Engulfed by the wave of suddenly distorted faces, the sea of wild eyes, the police and troops had no chance. The teenagers swept across the open air field like the ancient Zulu warriors.

Alone and tall, the president of the new country stood in the center of the field.

His bodyguards, everything forgotten now but the safety of their chief, fired their machine-guns directly into the advancing mob. The first wave of the roaring mob went down. Blood spurted across the earth of the field. Screams of pain filled the air. Legs and arms kicked, writhed on the ground.

But the mob did not stop, did not pause, did not hesitate even one second.

The bodyguards fired again, held down the triggers, the barrels of their sub-machine guns turning red.

The mob swept on.

Like the great ocean itself the mob of howling teenagers rolled across the field.

And then the mob passed on toward the distant edge of the open field and the dark jungle.

Behind them they left thirty of their own dead; they left a hundred wounded and writhing. They left the bodyguards trampled and groaning, the police and troops dazed and wounded. They left the twin-engined aircraft leaning crazily on one smashed wing.

And they left the tall president lying on his face, dead, with a long knife plunged into his back.

* * *

The Palladium in London rocked to the screams of the teenagers. On the lighted platform stage four young men sang, twisted, strummed guitars, banged the drums.

The young people screamed with delight. They laughed, clapped, sighed. Their bright young faces were excited with the beat of the music, the words of the singers.

One tall boy, his hair streaming out behind him, dove from the balcony. His bloody head lay smashed against a seat below.

* * *

In Sydney, Australia, the police answered a call. Citizens complained that there was a noisy party, disturbing the peace. When the police arrived in the rich suburb all was silent. Cautiously the police approached the house. Inside, in the basement playroom, they found the

dead bodies of twenty-two teenagers.

"Poison?" the detective said. "All of them?"

"Every one. And self-inflicted without a doubt. They all have the glasses near them."

"Mass suicide?" the detective said, unbelieving, staring.

* * *

The laboratory lay in burned, smoldering ruins. Captain Parker of the Chicago police stood beside the director of the laboratory.

"They were picketing—nothing unusual," the director said. "They know we are working on military research. Peace groups often picket us."

"Then they went wild?" the captain of Chicago police said.

"All at once, just before quitting time, the twenty of them became two hundred, perhaps three hundred."

"They broke into the building and set it on fire."

"All teenagers? Every one?"

"All," the director said. "And the plans for the nuclear fuse are gone."

* * *

On a side street in the Soho section of London a mob of young people blocked the path of an armored car. The driver and two guards got out to clear them off. The driver and both guards died later of multiple injuries from their beating. Two million dollars in gold bullion vanished.



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* *

The beach near Santa Barbara, California, was deserted when the sixteen boys and girls, all under eighteen years of age, walked into the sea and swam out of sight. They were never seen again.

"Like lemmings," the highway patrol officer said.

Bodies were washed ashore all week.

* * *

In Red Square, Moscow, the police failed to hold back the horde of long-haired youths when the deputy chief of security of the Polish Peoples Republic came to visit the tomb of Lenin. The police were reprimanded. The square was cleared by troops. Six of the teenagers died, and twenty went to prison.

But the deputy chief of security of the Polish Peoples Republic was dead.

Two

NAPOLEON SOLO looked deep into her eyes. Violet eyes, like deep, liquid marbles, pools of beauty. She was curled like a kitten at the end of a long, soft couch. Solo's smile was easy, youthful as he looked into those violet eyes.

"How do you do it, Maxine?" Solo whispered into her ear. "Be almost six feet tall and curl up into a powder puff—such a pretty powder puff?"

"Mirrors," Maxine Trent whispered back. "I do it all with mirrors."

"Not all with mirrors, I hope," Solo said softly.

"All, Napoleon Solo," she said. "I'm an illusion. I'm only a mirror myself. If you touch me, *poof!*"

Solo sighed. "The story of my life, *poof!*"

"Will you risk it? Touching me?" Maxine whispered.

"For you, I risk anything," Solo said.

"Go on! Go on!"

Solo leaned closer to her. The room—her room—was silent. The music that had been playing was gone now, the record player turning itself off automatically at just the right instant. Solo almost smiled; for his purposes he could

not have done it better himself. A very cooperative record player.

Too cooperative?

The sixth sense, the warning, went off in his brain. The split-second sensitivity to danger, even to potential danger, that had kept him alive longer than any chief enforcement agent U.N.C.L.E. had ever had. Was it coincidence, the record player stopping at just the precise instant he was about to bend down and kiss her?

He leaned close to her, smiling, her perfume in his nostrils. His eyes looked into her eyes. Behind his boyish, ardent smile, his mind went to work. He ran Maxine Trent through his mind like a card through a computer: Age 24; 5 foot 11 inches and all the right measurements to go with the height; a runner-up for Miss America one year; daughter of industrialist Clark Trent; known to like action and—danger. Introduced to Solo two weeks ago by John Knox, a young business executive Solo cultivated to hide his true occupation.

His true occupation was chief enforcement agent for United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—U.N.C.L.E. And U.N.C.L.E. was a supra-national organization sworn to somehow keep the world safe and, if possible, sane. Any enemy of any peaceful and honest person in the world was the enemy of U.N.C.L.E. It was hard work, dangerous work.

Now Solo wondered if the danger were close here, in the arms of Maxine Trent.

"Well, Napoleon," Maxine said. "I heard you were a man of action. You don't call this action—yet?"

Solo smiled. "You'd be surprised, my dear."

He was about to say more when the signal went off. A low sound, rising and falling, like a miniature version of the wailing horn of a Parisian police car. Solo reached quickly into the inside pocket of his coat and switched off the signal on the miniature radio set.

Maxine blinked up at him from the couch as he stood up.

"You're not leaving—*now*?"

"I am afraid I am," Solo said. "A previous appointment, my little alarm reminded me. Some other time we can pick it up, yes?"

She stared at him. He was a slender man of medium height. He was neither handsome nor ugly. A pleasant, friendly face that was usually smiling. His dark, brooding eyes were at the same time quick and bright. Intense eyes, but not hard and not jaded. Eyes that smiled an apology to Maxine now, yet were already seeing something else.

He turned quickly and walked to the door. The speed of the motion gave a slight indication of the strong, trained athlete's body concealed in his slender frame. What he lacked in size he more than made up for in catlike speed, in



skill, and in training. He seemed no different from the thousands of young executives, budding doctors, youthful professional men, and wealthy, if idle, playboys. He could have been anything from a tennis bum to a first echelon government man.

Solo was none of those things. He was a man trained to kill with a single blow of his innocent-seeming hand.

Once in the corridor of Maxine Trent's apartment house, Solo turned quickly left and walked to the fire stairs. He went through the door and down and out into the midtown Manhattan street. It was

late afternoon, and the streets were crowded.

Solo walked a block, blended with the crowd. Only then did he take out his small chrome metal and plastic sender-receiver set.

He quickly raised the two threadlike antennae, pressed a button on the instrument that fitted in the palm of his hand, and spoke low into it.

"Napoleon Solo here."

"Report to Mr. Waverly at once. Code Mayday," the crisp female voice of the radio communications girl said.

Solo clicked off his set, returned it to his pocket, and began to walk casually but quickly across town toward the East River.

* * *

Illya Kuryakin ran his thin fingers through his thatch of unkempt blond hair. The small, thin Russian muttered to himself.

The private library was as quiet as a tomb. Kuryakin was one of the two persons in the small, book-lined room. The other was an old man whose clothes had seen better days, but whose thirst for knowledge was undiminished. From time to time the ancient female librarian came into the room. She glared at Illya, who she obviously considered far too young to be a scholar.

Illya smiled disarmingly at the harriidan. With his blond, round-bowl haircut he looked like a mischievous Russian leprechaun; or a blond knight-errant, an impish

modern-day Prince Valiant with straw hair. His bright and quick eyes danced beneath his seriously lowered brow. His glance at the old woman was quizzical and amused—an amusement that did not show on his face as he looked up at her.

"Can I help you, madam?" Illya said to the librarian.

"I— I—" the woman stammered, caught staring at Illya.

Illya spoke softly. "I understand. You are wondering what so young a man is doing in a library on such a fine day?"

"I—"

Illya smiled. "You are wondering why I am studying so obscure a book about poisons? You wonder am I a spy, since I obviously read a foreign language. Ah, that is suspect, eh? A young man who reads a foreign language must be a spy at least, *nyet*? Ah, the young people today, such irresponsible animals, *nicht wahr*?"

"I—" the librarian blustered, and then turned scarlet as this wisp of a boy suddenly reached out and pinched her.

"Why, you—I!"

Illya laughed.

"Well!" the librarian snapped, turned and stalked off.

Illya smiled once more, and returned to his work. This library was one of his favorite places to spend an afternoon in New York. A private library devoted to strange, half-known poisons, mysteries of ancient witchcrafts and other su-

perstitutions, all the half insane fears of the human mind. That was Illya's single purpose in his life—to try to dispel the insanity of man, to try to save the idiot world from itself.

For that purpose he had studied, learned fifteen languages, left the service of the country of his birth to work for what he truly considered the only sane group of people on Earth—U.N.C.L.E.

For that purpose he still studied, trained his small but lithe body, devoted himself to the work. He had no interest in either command or position, only in doing the job better than anyone. He had no time for such rewards and frills of the world as money, honors, fine living, or creature comfort.

The signal on his transmitter-receiver went off. Instantly Illya became the 'quick, serious agent of U.N.C.L.E. The old librarian was looking around in fury for the source of the strange wailing sound. Illya shut off the signal, raised the small plastic and metal box to his lips.

"Kuryakin here."

"Mr. Waverly wants you at once. Code Mayday," the voice of the communications girl said.

Illya replaced the tiny radio set

in his pocket, returned his book to the desk, smiled winningly at the ancient librarian.

"Take very good care of the books, *liebchen*," he hissed at the old woman.

He could almost hear her red-faced anger behind him as he walked out and down to the late afternoon New York street. Smiling to himself at his own joke, he did not see the old man in the decrepit clothes move with far greater speed than he should have been capable of at his age. He did not see the old man follow him.

But he heard the footsteps behind him on the stairs.

He reached the street and for an instant was out of sight of the footsteps behind him. He reached into his jacket pocket for the tiny radio, raised the threadlike antennae, pressed the sending button.

"Sonny, this is Bubba. I have a bandit in tow. Plan 9."

Illya pressed his receive button. Instantly the tiny transmitter-receiver whispered low to him.

"Bubba from Sonny. Possible bandit here, too. Plan 9."

The voice of Solo faded. Illya walked on down the sunny street. In a store window he saw the figure of the old man behind him.

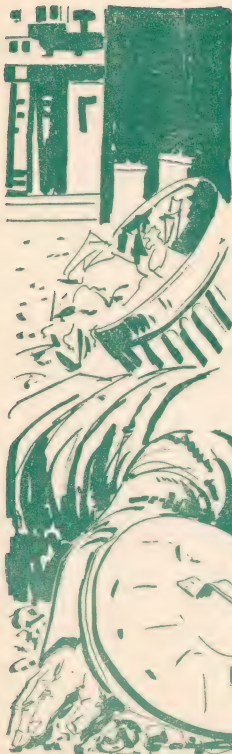
If you liked this preview as much as we did—a word of friendly advice. Run—not walk—to the newsstand where you bought this—and reserve your copy of U.N.C.L.E. now!

FEBRUARY ICE

The girl had been missing for five days. And the winter wind seemed to whisper a requiem.

by HAL ELLSON

THE WINTER WIND blew hard. Like a cold stinging whip, up the street it came from the blackness of the river a block away. Standing in a doorway, Sullivan gritted his teeth and watched the bar across the way. A neon sign



proclaimed its name—THE CRYSTAL LIGHT. There was nothing crystalline about it; it was grubby and dark and most of its patrons were grubby questionable characters.

Now its door flew open and out lurched a drunk who turned and railed against the injustice of the world, then gave vent to his anger by kicking at the door which had closed behind him. Suddenly it opened again, causing him to pitch forward to be met square in the face by a hand that catapulted him backward across the sidewalk to the curb's edge.

The door banged shut, and the drunk arose and lurched off, again railing against injustice on an empty, gaping street. Sullivan watched him, a skeleton of a man buffeted by the wind. Suddenly it slammed him against a cluster of empty ash-barrels which gave before him. Two toppled, taking him with them in a galvanic din, then off they rolled in the wind's grasp while the drunk, sprawled on the cold walk, beat futilely with his fists and protested anew this indignity to an unlistening world.

Another clown without a circus, Sullivan thought, unable to smile at these antics. Again the drunk rose on uncertain legs, floundered ridiculously and went down once more. This time he failed to rise.

Sullivan crossed the street and helped him up. His cheekbone was bruised from the fall, his eyes

glazed. "Come on, where's your home? I'll take you there," Sullivan said, feeling sorry for the man. His pity was countered by a demand to be left alone. The drunk pushed him and teetered backward.

Sullivan caught and steadied him, then shook him roughly. "You fool, sleep in the gutter tonight and you may not wake up in the morning. Now, where do you live?"

"Down there." The drunk nodded toward the river.

"There's no houses there."

"Scow," he mumbled. "The Mary-Jane. My boat. I'm the captain."

"All right, let's go." Sullivan gripped the man's arm and guided him down the dark street.

The wind blew, raw with the damp of the river which lay like a huge black band beyond the end of the street. Nothing was to be seen there, but when they reached the river's edge, two scows appeared. The long flat hulks, no more than shadows, moved restlessly.

"Which one is yours, Cap?"

The drunk nodded to indicate his own scow and moved toward it. When he reached it, it was swinging out from the dock. Either the drunken captain didn't realize this, or didn't care. A black gaping space, which was still widening, lay between the scow and the dock.

Sullivan had to restrain the captain from jumping. He waited, supporting the man until the scow swung back to the dock again. Then he staggered on board with him.

Ten minutes later Sullivan was back in the doorway where he had been standing since night had set in. A half-hour passed. Useless, he thought, watching the door of the Crystal Bar. He crossed the gutter and entered the bar. The interior was dingy and poorly lit. Perhaps this was intended, to conceal the flaws. If so, it didn't succeed.

Behind the bar, the pockmarked redheaded owner lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke directly at Sullivan. "So, it's you again," he said.

"That's right, Johnson. I'm here again."

"You're wasting your time."

"That's all right. I've time to waste."

"Okay, so you have, but why don't you get off my back?"

"I'd like to, but you don't seem to want me to. If you did—"

"I'd talk, but I haven't got anything to talk about."

"All right, I'll be back. I've plenty of time to waste."

Johnson shook his head. "Look, I don't want any trouble," he said and for the first time the hostility was gone from his voice.

"You won't have any trouble from me," Sullivan said quickly.

"All I want to know is if that girl was in here."

"Okay, she was."

"When was the last time?"

"Friday night."

"She came alone?"

"No, a young fellow was with her."

"Know his name?"

"Ray. I never knew his last name," Johnson said.

"Maybe he'll drop in tonight?"

"I don't think so."

"How come?" Sullivan asked.

"He's got a big mouth and a hot temper. I like to run an orderly place."

"Then you had trouble with him?" Sullivan asked.

"No." Johnson shook his head. Obviously he was covering something. It was in his eyes.

"What does he look like?" Sullivan asked.

"Your size and build—brown hair, brown eyes, a good-looking kid."

"That's not much to go on. Nothing special about him?"

"He never smiled."

"What else?"

Johnson shrugged. "He's got the biggest pair of hands I've seen in a long while."

"Can he use them?"

"What do you mean?" Johnson said blandly.

"Perhaps he had a fight in here."

Johnson shook his head. "I don't allow any rough stuff."

"All right, thanks." Sullivan started to leave, and Johnson leaned over the bar. "What happened to the girl?" he asked with the barest show of anxiety.

"Who said something happened to her?"

"I only asked, that's all."

"And I can't answer you, because I don't know," Johnson said. "But something could have happened."

"Yes, she's a real wild one."

Sullivan nodded and started for the door. Once outside, he lit a cigarette, immediately threw it away and walked down the street. It was a bad night to be out, bad to be on duty.

I picked the wrong business, he thought acidly and turned his mind to the matter at hand. Patricia Murphy, missing. Or is she dead? he wondered. Four hours ago he had interviewed Mrs. Murphy, a grey-haired tired-looking woman who had intoned over and over: "Pat's a little wild, but a good girl. Something happened to her. I can feel it in my bones."

Questioning her was difficult. Her mind was made up. Patricia was doomed. Sullivan had asked to see a photograph of the girl. Twice he asked, as if speaking to a deaf woman—and then came a whole slew of photographs to the accompaniment of tears and lamentations.

Boy friends? When the question was put to her, Mrs. Murphy

shook her head and moaned: "That was her trouble. I couldn't count them. Dozens and dozens she had. I couldn't keep up with the names, they changed so fast. Yes, there was a special one. Ray McManus. A real bum. He lived in the apartment directly below."

Sullivan had gone to see Ray McManus. No one answered when he knocked, but a neighbor responded, a wispy sparrow-like woman who was only too happy to answer questions with a deluge of acid details concerning Ray McManus and Patricia Murphy. Pat, she said, liked the older ones the most. For their money. A greedy girl. Sooner or later she'd have to pay the piper.

"Meaning what?" Sullivan asked her.

"One of 'em had to kill her, or it was Ray. I heard him threaten her more than once. He's a bad one. Never works, but always dressed. Pat's dead, I tell you. No, she wouldn't run off with one of them men. All she wanted was their money."

"What about girl friends?" Sullivan asked her.

"None," said the woman. "She didn't have time for them, but Flo Curry just below me, she can tell you plenty about Pat."

"I'll speak to her. Thank you, Mrs. —"

"Reilly. Flo will give you the details, but it won't help. Pat is dead, I tell you."

Flo Curry was tall, willowy, blonde and receptive to handsome men. Sullivan was handsome, but when he announced that he was a detective and wished to question her about Patricia Murphy, she snarled, "Drop dead, Mister," and slammed the door in his face.

Mrs. Murphy believed her daughter was dead; her talkative neighbor had thought the same. Pat Murphy, a girl who knew her way around—but missing for five days. Perhaps she is dead, Sullivan thought, but that settled nothing.

He lit another cigarette, buttoned his collar against the cold, turned the corner and caught the wind off the river. It felt like a knife ripping his back.

Before him stretched a long block, dismal and dark and fronted with two rows of woe-begone brownstones with high stoops and corroded iron railings. Respectability in decay.

Sullivan shook his head. At least in the old days there were no Pat Murphys running wild, no unpredictable young people of her kind to deal with.

At the far corner of the block light filtered through the glass-brick facade of a bar. A windowed door in back gave view to a dingy grill-room where, amidst a half-dozen naked tables, sat a solitary diner.

Sullivan went in the front door and forgot to close it. A bull-

necked character with a foghorn voice told him in no uncertain terms that it wasn't summer. Flushing, Sullivan went back and closed the door. When he turned, he couldn't help but notice a group of young men in the rear.

They were overly loud even for this lively place—and one was particularly boisterous, to the annoyance of the barman. That one turned now and said, "Put a damper on it, or take a walk."

The boisterous youth cocked his head, glared and said, "Who's going to make me walk?"

In answer, the barman grabbed a full quart of White Horse by the neck, which only set off the youth. He started to climb the bar. At this point, Sullivan moved in.

"Better step outside with me," he said, letting go of the young man. He had seized his wrists, noted the huge fists.

"Who are you?" the young man wanted to know.

Sullivan flashed his badge. "I want to ask you some questions. Just you. Your friends can stay."

"What kind of questions?"

"Let's go outside."

The young man balled his huge fists; he appeared ready to fight. Sullivan wasn't impressed. He turned and went out the door. Moments later the young man stepped to the sidewalk. His fists were still balled, his face sullen.

"Okay, copper. Let's have the questions," he snarled.

This was modern youth. Sullivan wanted to take him by the collar and rattle his teeth. At the same time, he almost smiled at the young man's display of hardness; his wish to prove himself a man, the deadly malady of this new generation.

Sullivan shook his head. "Better relax," he said. "We're not going to fight."

"What's the questions, cop-per?"

"Okay, tough guy. I want to know all about Pat Murphy, or don't you know her?"

"Yeah, I know her, but what about her?"

"She's been missing for five days."

"So?"

"You didn't know that?"

"It's news to me."

Sullivan let out his breath. All these young punks had seen the same movie and were repeating the 'hero' role. "You're Pat's boy friend," he said. "It shouldn't be news."

"Boy friend? She's got dozens."

"But you're special."

"Look, nobody is with that dame."

"You have all the answers, haven't you?" Sullivan said innocently.

"That's right. All of them."

"Good. Then maybe you can answer this. What happened to Pat Murphy five nights ago after she left the Crystal Bar with you

or weren't you there and am I mistaken that you're Ray McManus?"

The facade of toughness and belligerence collapsed like a pricked balloon. Ray McManus paled, his balled hands relaxed and dropped. Flustered, he began to stutter inanely.

"What happened that night?" Sullivan prodded.

"I don't know."

"You can do better. Try again and save yourself a lot of trouble."

"All right, we were in the Crystal Bar five nights ago," McManus admitted. "We shouldn't have been, but we were. It was Pat's idea. It was always her idea."

"What idea do you mean?"

"She likes money, and that means men—but not the way you may think. The idea was to get the money from them, and give nothing. Drunks are easy game, so we played the bars."

"What part did you play?"

"Escort. She could get in places with me. Alone, they'd throw her out."

"And how did she get the money?"

"By promising—and that's all. She never gave more than a promise. Most times that was enough."

"But not five nights ago. What happened at the Crystal Bar?"

"There were two scow captains there. Both were loaded, with money and liquor. When Pat saw

all that money, she didn't know which one to play, so she played both. She's a good-looking kid, and those two were really lit, so they got to arguing over her. That's when I stepped in. The barman didn't like the noise and threw us all out. The argument continued on the sidewalk, and Pat gave me the high sign to stay out of it.

"The two captains fought each other for the prize—which was supposed to be Pat. The bigger man won, but it seems they were friends, so the big one picked up the smaller and all three of them went down to the river."

McManus stopped at this point, a troubled look on his face.

"Then what happened?"

"Pat went aboard the big fellow's scow."

"What about the other captain?"

"His scow was right alongside. I helped him aboard and put him in his bunk." McManus hesitated again.

"Then?"

"I waited a few minutes. That's all it ever took Pat to snatch a man's roll. Well, she didn't come out of the cabin, so I went aboard. The door was open, the cabin empty."

"What did that indicate to you?" Sullivan asked.

"I didn't know," McManus shrugged. "Nothing ever happened like that before."

"So what did you do?"



"Do? Nothing, except I waited around a bit. Then I took off."

"You weren't worried about Pat?"

"Well, she can take care of herself, but I did wait for her at our stoop. She never showed up."

"You never went to the police?"

McManus shrugged. "The police are trouble, even if you're innocent. I thought I'd be in trouble, that they wouldn't believe me—and I guess you don't."

McManus looked up at Sullivan. Obviously he wanted an answer to his last statement, but Sullivan ignored it and said, "What do you think happened to Pat?"

A shrug.

"Do you think she's alive?"

"I don't know."

"How long were you in the cabin of the other scow?"

"A couple of minutes at the most," McManus said.

"How come you stayed in the cabin?"

"It was freezing outside."

"In those few minutes, what do you think happened, or could have happened?"

McManus shook his head.

"I don't know."

"Take a guess."

McManus rocked his head as if in anguish. Finally he said, "Something must have gone wrong. Like maybe that captain wasn't as drunk as he seemed. Maybe he caught Pat pinching his roll." Here, McManus hesitated, then let out his breath. "Maybe he pushed her overboard."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because there's nothing else to think. She never came home and she certainly didn't run off with the captain."

"Then you think Pat is dead?"

"I'm sure she is."

Mrs. Murphy had voiced the same idea, and her talkative neighbor was certain of it. Sullivan was inclined to believe them now. If the girl was in the river, her body might not come to the surface till spring—or never.

Sullivan nodded and said, "Those two scows—where were they located?"

"Straight down the street from the Crystal Bar."

"Do you remember the captains names?" Sullivan asked.

"Only one, McManus replied. 'The little fellow's. It was Lief.'"

"What about the names of the scows?"

"I didn't take notice."

"All right, McManus."

"That's all?" McManus looked surprised.

"That's all. You can go back to your friends."

Sullivan walked back to the river's edge. An icy wind was blowing off the river, black water slapped at the two scows heaving at the bulkhead. The same two that McManus had mentioned. Sullivan stared at them. Earlier he'd escorted the drunken captain aboard one and tumbled him into his bunk. There was an outside chance that he was one of the men who had fought over Pat Murphy.

Sullivan jumped aboard the scow. The cabin door was still unlocked. He pushed it open, struck a match, lit the oil-lamp fastened to the wall and turned to the captain who lay sprawled on his bunk.

"Captain."

No answer.

Sullivan spoke again, then stooped and pulled the man to a sitting position and shook him roughly. The effort was useless. The man was stupified. Sullivan released him and he sagged backward across the bunk.

THE WINDOW KEPT rattling. Finally the sound brought Sullivan awake. Still dark. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep. When he opened his eyes again, the morbid grey light of the winter morning had invaded the room. The wind was still blowing, the window rattling. It felt good to be under the warm covers.

Yawning, Sullivan turned his head and the rigid hands of the clock sitting on the bureau across the room caught his eye. Ten o'clock. It can't be, he told himself.

But the clock didn't lie. The grey light made it seem like early morning. In a second he was out of bed, dressing, swearing, fumbling with his clothes.

Four minutes and he was out of the house, buttoning his coat on the run. A taxi was passing the corner. He whistled frantically. It sped on.

He kept running.

Twenty minutes later another taxi dropped him off at the river's edge. An ugly site, and a nasty morning, the wind cutting and river in turmoil—but the two scows were still there. Scarred and battered, they heaved against the bulkhead.

With a leap, Sullivan made the deck of the one he'd boarded the previous evening. The cabin door was wide open and there at the stove sat the captain, clear-eyed and alert. For the moment Sulli-

van was taken back. Was this the man?

"Morning!" said the captain.

"Mind if I come in?"

Sullivan drew a chair up to the stove.

"Not at all. Take a chair."

"Coffee?"

"No, thanks," Sullivan said and identified himself, which didn't at all affect the calmness of the captain.

"And to what do I owe your visit?" he said easily.

"It concerns a girl you met in the Crystal Bar five—six days ago. Do you remember her?"

"I do. What about her?"

"You fought over her with another man."

"Jonas Jonsen, the captain of that scow right out there. He gave me a good beating, so he got the girl."

"She went aboard his scow with him?"

"That's right."

"Have you seen her since that night?"

"No."

"What about Jonsen?"

"I haven't seen him either."

"Isn't that rather odd? You're lying right next to each other and yet—"

"It's not so odd. Sometimes, when he drinks, Jonsen goes off for a week. When I didn't see him, I figured he was on another tear."

(Please turn to page 138)

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"You don't think he ran off with the girl?"

The captain grinned and shook his head. "He's crazy, but not that crazy."

Sullivan hesitated, then said slowly, "Suppose the girl rolled him and he caught her?"

"What would he do?" the captain said blandly. "I don't know. I can only speak for myself."

"And what would you do?"

"Throw her overboard."

"Perhaps that's what Jonsen did."

"Maybe, but I couldn't say."

"And after throwing her overboard he got frightened and ran."

As calm and unmoved as before, the captain stared at Sullivan and finally shook his head. "If Jonsen killed the girl, he wouldn't run. He's too wise for that, but I don't think he killed the girl."

"She was with him on his scow—and she never reached home. No one saw her since."

"Does that mean Jonsen killed her?"

"He was the last one known to have been with her."

The captain shrugged, either out of weariness or boredom, it was difficult to tell. With his pale-blue eyes he seemed to be saying, Why all these questions with me? I had nothing to do with the girl. I don't even remember what she looked like.

Finally he spoke: "If Jonsen

was the last one to see the girl, why don't you speak to him? There's his scow."

"I know," Sullivan replied. "But you told me you haven't seen him since that night."

"That's right, but maybe he came back. If he did, he could still be sleeping."

Sullivan nodded and stood up. The captain did the same and followed him out the door. The narrow deck-space, with the icy wind coming off the river and the scow pitching wildly, suddenly became a precarious path. When a plume of spray showered the cabin, Sullivan tried to draw back and couldn't.

The captain laughed and said, "It's safer to stand and take it. Anyway, there's no place you can run."

Irritated, Sullivan said, "You seem to like this."

"Sure, the wilder the river and the colder it is, the better I like it. It reminds me of the old country. Look." The captain pointed at the rubber tires hanging from the bow of the opposite scow. The make-shift bumpers were completely coated with ice. "Now that's a pretty sight," the captain declared.

Every man to his own taste, thought Sullivan, and headed for shore as the wind momentarily lulled. An awkward leap and he made the bulkhead. Just as awkwardly he boarded Jonsen's scow and saw the captain on the oppo-



site deck grinning at him. Again he was irritated, but this time by his own inadequacy in this alien element.

Now the wind came surging back, and suddenly the deck beneath him wasn't there.

A moment later it rose at a sickening angle. With his arms flung against the cabin and his back pressed to it, inch by inch he made his way across the heaving deck to the cabin door. As he touched it, it opened before him. Barely managing to keep his balance, he stepped inside and froze

in his tracks, for there on the bunk sat a girl.

Dirt and grease darkened her emaciated face and terror welled from her eyes, but most startling was her hair. Uncombed and wild, it appeared to be standing on end. Not a girl, but a starving animal. She shrank back as Sullivan stepped forward.

"You don't have to be afraid of me," he said.

His words, the first spoken to her in the past six days, transformed her. The terror vanished from her eyes, a sob escaped her.

"I didn't mean to do it," she said.

"Do what, Patricia?" Sullivan said, sitting down on the bunk and patting her arm. "What happened?"

"He's dead."

"Who is?"

"The captain. I pushed him overboard."

"You rolled him and he caught you at it. Is that why?"

"No. I didn't have to steal his money. He gave it to me, everything from his wallet, but that's when I got scared. He wasn't as drunk as I thought and grabbed me. I broke away and ran out the door. He grabbed me again. I pushed him and he fell. I can still hear the splash."

The truth, or hysteria? "Why did you stay here?" Sullivan asked.

"I was frightened," the girl answered. "I couldn't go home. I didn't know what to do."

A shout from outside interrupted Sullivan. Irritated, he got up, went to the door and saw the captain on the next scow. The man was waving and pointing; all his calm had gone.

"What is it?" Sullivan said.

"Come over here and you'll see."

"See what?"

"Jonsen." The captain was pointing at the tires hanging from the scow. Puzzled, Sullivan stepped on deck, looked over the side and saw nothing.

"Over here. Come over here," the captain said frantically.

He seemed like a madman now, and Sullivan gave in. Moments later he joined him on the opposite deck. The captain pointed and there, clinging to one of the tire-bumpers and encased in a mass of ice which had formed around him was the faintly discernible body of a man.

"He must have fallen overboard and couldn't climb back," the captain said innocently. "Right under my nose all these days and I never noticed till now."

He shook his head and went back in his cabin. As the door closed, the wind blew harder. Both scows lumbered heavily and another plume of spray rose from the river to douse the pitiful figure of the dead man entombed in his icy sheath.



Feature Now Showing

*She was lush, exotic—and every inch a
tramp. Yet he desired her more than life.*

by **HAL DRESNER**

THE FEATURE don't start for ten minutes, so you might as well wait out here. Ever since the manager bought that recording thing to give people the times when they call, I don't get to talk to anyone anymore.

Frankly, this is not the greatest job in the world. But in this neighborhood there's just not that many places a girl can work and still keep her self-respect, if you know what I mean. At least I'm not on my feet all the time, like that candy girl, and sometimes people

will forget their change so I can pick up an extra dollar or two.

Besides, it is out in the open. I mean I can see the street and watch the people go by, so it don't get too dull. You'd be surprised how much you can learn about people if you keep your eyes open. I don't mean just who's taking who to the show. I mean about human nature.

You take that new sexton down at St. Paul's, I can tell you he's not as holier-than-thou as he acts, because he comes sneaking around

here in the afternoon every time we got a Brigitte Bardot film running. And Leonora Belk, that awful snob? Well she's been here a couple of times with guys my mother would never let me be seen with. Not that my mother is so particular, but T-shirts and *levis*. A girl's got to have some self-respect.

And the Lorbers—well, there's a couple I know just everything about. Their private life is almost public, if you know what I mean.

He's just a nice old bald-headed man, about forty-five—the kind you can tell just likes his beer and TV at night and hates to get dressed to go anywhere. I mean you can't really blame him, because he must work hard enough in that dress shop. I bet he makes a pretty penny too because I certainly can't afford any of his stuff. Forty-eight-fifty for a knit sheath. Can you imagine?

Well, she's just the opposite, if you know what I mean. Heavy rouge, mascara, eye-liner. Someone really should tell her. I mean she's not a bad looking woman but when you get to be thirty-six or seven you can't go around trying to look like Tuesday Weld.

The very first time I saw them I could tell they weren't getting along too well. I mean it was perfectly obvious he didn't want to go to the show in the first place, since they were arguing all the way down the block and didn't even stop when he bought the tickets.

He said, "You wanted to go out, we're going out. I'm not spending two hours on the subway and two-fifty a ticket to see a movie that'll be here in another month."

And she said, "You're nothing but a skinflint. We haven't been out of the house in three weeks."

But anyway they went in and saw Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in "The Sandpiper" but you could tell by her look when they came out that she didn't enjoy that lovely picture one bit.

The next time they came was a week later just after we changed to "Morituri" with Marlon Brando, and they went through the same routine again. He said if she didn't like it she could stay home or find somebody else to take her places. And she came right back with, "Well, maybe I will."

Well you can imagine my surprise when the very next Saturday she shows up with this young Warren Beatty type. Very tall and muscular and wearing a black sport jacket. She was dressed like she was going to visit the White House or something.

They didn't go in to the show, of course. I think she just walked by here so everybody could get a look at him. He was a real beauty. But you know where they went? Right across the street to Nemo's Bar! Can you imagine?

I mean it was so obvious he wasn't a cousin or anything. For a married woman to behave that way in

public, in her own *neighborhood*, and on Saturday night when we always have our biggest crowd. Well, talk all you want about self-respect . . .

Anyway right after that Mr. Lorber started to come here on Wednesday afternoons. That's the day his place is closed, you know, and he came every Wednesday for a month straight, even when we were holding over The Beatles in "Help." If you ask me, he just came here to sleep. He certainly looked like he needed it and I'll bet he wasn't getting much at home, waiting up for her to come in.

It kept up that way for a while. I'd see her with that *friend* on the weekends, walking arm in arm or driving by in his blue convertible with the top down. Once they even came in here and saw "Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines" and sat up in the loge, no less.

And poor Mr. Lorber would check in every Wednesday afternoon as soon as we opened for his couple of hours of sleep.

It wasn't any of my business, of course, but a girl just can't close her eyes to that kind of thing, especially when it's happening right under her nose. Frankly, I didn't see how long it could keep up. After all, Mr. Lorber is no jerk. I mean I guess it took some brains to run that store and even a blind man could see what was going on. I

mean she just didn't seem to care who knew about it.

Well, it turned out that I was right. Just last week the two of them showed up together and she was wearing sun glasses that weren't big enough to cover a black and blue mark. Of course she could have just run into a door or something, but since they weren't arguing for a change, I figured it was him and no door. I didn't really blame him either, you know? Anyway he was all set to buy the tickets, but she couldn't decide if she wanted to go in and kept looking at the pictures.

"Well," he said to her. "Do you want to see it or not?"

"Don't rush me," she said. "I'll make up my mind when I'm good and ready."

"You make up your mind quick enough about other things," he said.

I knew what that meant and so did she.

She said, "You just shut your dirty mouth. I'll decide when I'm ready and not a damned second before."

Can you imagine? Saying that right here in front of the theatre? On Friday night yet?

Well that was enough for him. Or too much I guess, because he told her she could go to hell and walked away.

She just stood there watching him, not knowing what to do. Finally she went into the drugstore.

They missed a pretty good show, too. "The Great Race" with Tony Curtis.

That was last week and I guess nothing's changed because today Mr. Lorber came in for his Wednesday nap. Poor man, he certainly looked beat. One funny thing though. You know who also was in today? Her Warren Beatty type friend. He's not really that good looking when you see him close up and he was so nervous about something that he could hardly pick up his change.

Anyway, I thought how funny it would be if the two of them happened to sit next to each other without knowing who the other one was, you know? But I guess that didn't happen because Mr. Blue Convertible came out about twenty minutes later. I guess he must of realized he saw the show before. Mr. Lorber is still in there thought. Come to think of it, it's been five hours. He must really be sleeping!

Oh, you can go in now. The feature's just starting.

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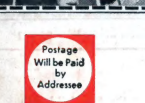
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